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**RECLAIMING THE VIRGIN BIRTH NARRATIVE IN LATIN AMERICA
FEMINIST LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

by

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Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis three interrelated tasks are undertaken. Firstly, it attempts to unveil the misogyny of the Catholic Church fathers' andocentric miss-reading of the Virgin Birth narrative. Secondly, it looks at feminist theologians' critical analyses of Marian devotion in Latin America as being about the veneration of an archetypal figure working in the interests of patriarchal social control and the oppression of women. Thirdly, it discusses the hermeneutical method of Feminist Liberation Theologians which has been designed to uncover and critique andocentric scriptural interpretations, and reinterpret the traditional images of the Bible from a feminist perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The debate around the Virgin Birth narrative reveals many of the perennial tensions or dissonances between religion and feminism. This contrast helps us to locate the issues which those who are committed to working within the academic study of religion are confronted with when entering from a feminist standpoint.

One of the feminist theologians' most important tasks in facing the problem of the Virgin Birth is the recognition of how the dominance of patriarchal perspectives and interests have silenced and subordinated women. This is the starting-point of all feminist critique aimed at the Theological tradition and discourse. To draw on mainstream theology uncritically as being empowering to women merely affirms the force of patriarchy in religion and its resultant effects of marginalizing and demonizing women's identity's and their concerns (Graham, 1997: 112).

In *Sexism and God Talk – towards a feminist theology*, Rosemary Radford Ruether, a Catholic Feminist theologian, focuses her critical analyses on “patriarchal anthropology” within classical Christian orthodoxy, stating that “within history, woman subjugation is both the reflection of her inferior nature and the punishment for her responsibility for sin” (1983: 95). This patriarchal theological perspective came to dominate the Christian churches, in different contexts and it is found throughout classical Christian theology.

One of the main points of contention raised by feminist theologians in their pursuit to find the reasons behind women's inferiority inside and outside the church lies in the contrasting interpretations of Eve and Mary throughout the first centuries of the church. According to Marina Warner this differential interpretation of the scriptures shifted in later stages from narrative metaphor to the pragmatic ideal of virginity and celibacy, “from religious sign to moral doctrine” and consequently becoming the source of the oppressive traditional view of women in religious contexts (1976: 49). Hence, my main research aim poses the question of how the development of the narrative of the Virgin Birth has influenced the position of women in contemporary society?

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By uncovering andocentric interpretations of the scriptures, the Virgin Birth hermeneutic becomes a tool for working out the complexity underwriting the following interrelated questions: ‘How did the existing gender structure come to exist?’; ‘Why has the Virgin Mary endured such a potent image of veneration?’; ‘What legitimizes the authority of the idea that Mary and Jesus were sexless?’; ‘Why are women still constrained by sexism within Western society?’ Scholars have been responding to these questions by turning to their historical origins. Michael P. Carroll (1986) draws on the discipline of psychology to enter the debate; Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) through anthropology; Maurice Hamington (1995) through history; Leonard Boff (1987) through liberation theology and Ivone Gebara (1987) through feminist liberation theology.

This implies that the many ideological interpretations of the Virgin Birth narrative posited in many church traditions and by many people is mainly ontological, and therefore, indeed need to be called into question and critically re-evaluated. I aim to show this by using feminist method of critique and analysing the development of the Virgin Birth narrative, hence the Marian devotion. According to Elisabeth Fiorenza-Schüssler the task of such feminist critique is to uncover “theological traditions and myths that perpetuate sexist ideologies, violence, and alienation.” (Fiorenza, 1979: 146)

Feminist theology draws on the broader fundamentals of feminist theory e.g. notions of women being encouraged to recognize their oppression, to name their oppression and to overthrow it. Thus it analyzes sexuality, socialization, production, reproduction and how women are constructed by patriarchy in each of these areas, socially, economically, politically and culturally and religiously (Young, 1990: 12).

Feminist Theology has developed and made use of its own method of theoretical reflection on ecclesiastical or religious terms. For example, Protestant Christian feminist theologian Pamela Dickey Young argues in (1990) *Feminist Theology/Christian theology –In search of Method*, that we should view women’s experience as the only norm and

source for feminist methodology, instead of drawing upon the Christian tradition as ultimate norm and source for understanding the world:

When the question of methodology for feminist theology is raised, one of the key issues is the relationship between past tradition and present experience. (1990: 20)

This ongoing interrelationship between past tradition and present experience is provoked by the question of continuity and change. Christian feminist theology has challenged and questioned the mainstream Christian tradition. They have tried to reformulate, rework and rethink the tradition from women's experience of patriarchy, of their selves and other oppressed women's context stand point (Young, 1990: 20; 68). As the feminist theologian Elaine Graham contends, their explicit analysis of the effects of religion in the lives of women is in order to liberate women from patriarchal culture and ideology, thus to foster in theology the full humanity of women (Graham, 1997: 111).

The feminist theological critique aimed at traditional theology is very well represented, with a vast body of literature. In the main, scholars have argued two points; firstly aiming sharp criticism at traditional readings of the scripture with the intent of rescuing the sacred texts from typically andocentric interpretations, and hence restoring what they regarded as Christianity's essentially egalitarian spirit (Graham, 1997: 111).¹ Secondly, they aim to reconstruct interpretations of the scriptures from a feminist perspective.

My aim though, in this first chapter is primarily to use the feminist theological hermeneutic method to uncover andocentric interpretations of the scriptures by drawing on the power of the narrative of the Virgin Birth. I shall then turn, secondly in chapter 2, to contextualise a "Latin America Christian" interpretation of the Virgin Birth Narrative, and thirdly assess the nature of the recent reattempts of reconstructing the interpretive tradition in chapter 3, by the Latin American Christian feminists. I shall devote the first

¹ See Ruether (1983: 99 – 115) for further elaboration on this point.

and indeed greater part of my thesis to the background of the Virgin Birth, from the first centuries of the church to the reformers Luther and Calvin.

I will approach the roles and symbolic images of women in the history of the Christian and Ancient tradition, in using K.W. Bolle's definitions of myth as a tool to understand the development of the history of the Virgin Birth in the Judeo traditional interpretive style- Midrash. In order to introduce my discussion on myth and Midrash I will draw principally on Bolle, however, this author's theoretical insights will feature only sparsely in the rest of this thesis. This will merely be an introduction and therefore not an elaborate exposition of what a myth is, but rather an introduction to some of Bolle's main theoretical tenets and an attempt, thereby to create a space for one of the most important preoccupations of feminist theology, the critical interrogation of the central scriptures, stories and symbols of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Therefore, I will approach the creation narrative as dealt with in the Midrash; and consequently the position of the Virgin Birth narrative in scripture, however my aim in this section is not simply to discuss the theological points generated from those myths, but I also would like to pay attention and recognition to this ongoing religious phenomenon – The Virgin Birth Narrative and the resultant Virgin Mary cult.

Throughout the first chapter I would simply like to construct a bridge to understand how the myth has taken on a life of its own in the Latin America context, a topic that will be explored in more detail in the second chapter. However, I will limit my enquiry only to those hypotheses of the Marian image which are of relevance to this thesis; thus, throughout the first chapter I will be providing an important framework for the theoretical and analytical presuppositions of this thesis.

I shall review and evaluate hypotheses about the origin of the Virgin Birth myth and consequently the Mary cult as they appear amongst the works of the church fathers. Understanding the history of Mariology is key to unlocking the evolution of Marian images, as well understanding of the religious background that gave birth to the church's

misinterpretations of the virgin birth, and its implications for modern Christians (Hamington 1995: 9). My task here is to draw out and make clear the theoretical argument that lies behind how the Virgin Birth narrative became so powerful as to shape gender structures, gender identity, gender relations and representations over the centuries. Although I will not go into great detail about the history or give the precise chronology of significant events, I will examine the theological doctrine and concepts of the Virgin Birth in light of the growing awareness that women have been pictured and portrayed almost exclusively from a male stand point and consequently, have been oppressed and moulded in the church as well as in other parts of society by this oppressive world view.

Shortly I will approach the ancient traditional understanding of virgin births paying attention to what has been termed the historical processes' hypothesis, which may explain what gave rise to the cult of Mary. My argument will flow from the Greek cultural worship of goddesses in general to the specific case of the Christian cult of Mary and its syncretistic practices of worship.

In chapter 2 I will analyze how the Virgin Birth narrative has been interpreted and portrayed in the Latin American context from a feminist theological perspective. Therefore, I will provide a résumé of the historical background of the Christian European colonizers arrival in the Americas and will point out the theological outlook they brought with them. I will take into consideration the "natives" or indigenes reality and the religious syncretism which they engaged in while under the siege of the conquistadors. In this way, I hope to account for how the missionaries' understanding of the virgin birth was to have a negative influence on women's social standing both inside and outside of the church. Secondly, by drawing on feminist theological' critical analyses, it is my intention to approach Marian piety in Latin America as a cultural phenomenon which emerged from veneration of an archetypal figure that was used as a tool of patriarchal social control and the oppression of women. It is my aim to bring to light the role of the Papacy in perpetuating an oppressive one dimensional Catholic sexual morality rooted in a patriarchal reading of the Virgin Birth narrative; simply, deploying Mary as a powerful symbol for feminine subordination.

Traditionally, in South America, Protestants and Catholics have had a tense relationship. On the one hand, Protestants have tried to dismiss many elements of Latino “culture [because of] their connections with Catholicism” (Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 85). Despite Protestants making up a significant proportion of Christians in South America, and mainly in Brazil, and the fact that theological work emanating out of this tradition has been revolutionary, here, they will receive sparse attention. Catholicism, as the predominant form of Christianity in South America, will form the primary tradition of focus here. Specifically, I hope to look at how the Catholic Church’s particular Virgin Birth reading has shaped the social standing of women in this context.

In the third chapter, I hope to critically analyze the romantic patriarchy of Leonardo Boff using feminist theological arguments as my focus. Here I will juxtapose his work with that of Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, and their perspectives on Mariology, showing, overall, how the hermeneutic method of Feminist Liberation Theologians unveils androcentric interpretations of the Bible, and how, ultimately Feminist Liberation Theology, working in the broader aims of the tradition of Feminist Theology, has made significant steps in reconstructing the Christians tradition, by asserting a new Latin American reading of the scriptures. I will conclude the chapter with a little reflection on ecumenicalism in South America, by looking at the varying significance of the religious phenomenon of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a case study.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1. Myth – An overview – The nature and role of myth

Throughout the years mythographers have been exploring and discussing the definitions and implications of myth. I would like to draw on this body of knowledge to provide a better description of myth.

A myth is an expression of the sacred in words: it reports, realities and events from the origin of the world that remain valid for the basis and purpose of all there is. Consequently, a myth functions as a model for human activity, society, wisdom and knowledge. (Bolle, 1987: 261)

Kees Bolle defines myth as the means of communicating the sacred through words, but at the same time also validating the authority implicit within any sacred story. This hidden authority rejects any kind of discussion of the authenticity of the myth. As all cultures are unique, their sacred stories are kept alive by their cultural idiosyncrasy (Bolle, 1987: 261-262).

The themes of myth are innumerable. It is important to be aware that scholars claim that the authority of a myth can never be judged because it is mostly claimed that myths were developed during times when people were attending contextually unique existential matters, matters and contexts that cannot be fully comprehended today (Bolle, 1987: 262).

Myths are resources of civilizations, with their speeches, poetry and literature. Today, historians, anthropologist, feminist theologians and etc, by referring to the diverse narratives etched in these textual remains, can only speculate about the kind of existence ancient civilizations lived.

Bolle affirms that scholars working in different fields such as sociology, psychology and others have contributed to a greater understanding of these myths. The focus here has been on trying to understand specific group contexts, culture, costumes, cosmogony, and ethnographical reasons that impel groups to develop and preserve the essential validity of their sacred stories (Bolle, 1987:262-263). On the other hand, Eliade has pointed out that myths does much more than simply explain events or phenomena; it stands in place of and reveals the cosmogony underlying the myth. As he puts it: “myths reveal the structure of reality” (Eliade, 1957:15). In general these narratives bring us back to the beginning of all life, the cosmogony or the birth of everything (Spence, 1921: 11-12). Poignantly, W. R Halliday has observed that “the commonality of the problem of existence as the reason for the striking similarity of myths around the world” (as quoted in Sellers, 2001: 2).

According to Bolle myth may give us an understanding though a not scientific explanation of our ancestors world view and events that occurred around them, which at the time escaped rational interpretation (Bolle, 1987: 264). Therefore, my argument here is that any reflection on myth reveals the human ability to explain extraordinary events that are beyond scientific comprehension. I would like to give two examples; firstly, the widespread belief in the divine acts of deities among ancient civilizations, and their apparent interaction with remarkable people; and secondly, in the early years of the church, the development of the myth of the Virgin Birth and the belief in the interaction of this young woman with God, although this belief became more a matter of faith, then of identity and rule. According to Bolle “myth deals with “supernatural” events, in a similar way to fairytales; they deal with extraordinary figures comparable to those in legends and sagas, and so on” (Bolle, 1987: 264).

1.2. The myth of the Virgin Birth?

According the Liberation Theologian Leonard Boff, some studies in the comparative history of religion attempt to see the Virgin Birth narrative as a reproduction of pagan myths. A brief consideration of some of the main building blocks of this theoretical

outlook it will afford us an understanding of the various manifestations of the feminine within Christian theological space. Boff's *The Maternal Face of God* articulates that the feminine within Christian space has been transferred to Mary and used as an ideological tool "to instil the spirit of submission in women...by the male of the species" (Boff, 1987: 250).

The only way that a religious phenomenon can be traced is through the recognition of its grounds. As my point of departure I will analyze the Virgin Birth narrative using the theoretical framework which looks at myth from a structural standpoint, outlined in the work of Bolle. According to Bolle, myths have a stereotypical structure, therefore it is possible to make a short comparison between the Virgin Birth narrative and five of his arguments about mythical structures, with the objective of exposing the Virgin Birth myth as conforming to one of his structural types.

The Virgin Birth narrative is most clearly expounded in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. Typically, the story begins with the angel Gabriel's announcement to a young Hebrew woman called Mary that she will conceive and bring into the world the Son of God:

[T]hen said Mary unto the angel, how shall this be, seeing I know no man? And the angel answered and said unto her, / The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, / and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee" (Lk. 1:34-35). After the angel's announcement, Mary speaks the formula of acceptance, "Be it unto me according to thy word" (Lk. 1:38), and in that moment the Hebrew maid is transformed into the virgin mother. (Leeming, 1987: 276)

Firstly, Bolle points out that the unity of a myth within an ancient civilization arose out of the belief that it represented the ultimate world, the mystery of oneness or the world of God, while in addition these narratives were usually woven into a lyrical or poetic style. This hypothesis is typically aligned with the history of religion's approach (Bolle, 1987:

264). In taking a look at the Virgin Birth Narrative few rhetorical questions are important as may generate a critical re-evaluation of the main pillars within Christianity: is the Virgin Birth narrative not totally constituted of poetry? Have the final words relating to Jesus' virginal birth of not been central to Christianity for centuries? Does this not stand as the unquestionable explanation for how the Son of God came to us?

Secondly, Bolle points out that "each society, culture, or historical epoch has nothing but its own vocabulary to tell even its most basics myths" (ibid). Thus, when one undertakes an investigation of the Virgin Birth narrative, focusing on its unique vocabulary, epoch and style what does one find? According to Spong it was not the intention of the storytellers Matthew and Luke to write stories or to be biographical researchers, but the entire narrative of Jesus' birth was Christian Midrash², written to interpret the adult life of Jesus in a certain way that could feed the first-century Christians (Spong, 1992: 85). This issue will be addressed at later stage.

Thirdly, the themes of myth are innumerable. Typically they are peopled with Gods and Goddesses, but often also animated with creatures from the animal kingdom, the elements of the earth, as well as vegetation. Though, at first sight myths have much in common with many other forms of folk literature, the difference is that myths more often refer to the origin of things, the beginning of existence, commonly expounding their explanations in a poetic manner (Bolle, 1987: 264-265). Applying this to the Virgin Birth narrative, we find a woman, so pure and docile that she could not have said "no" to an angel that came to her and told her that God, the almighty, requested her to have a baby. A human being was going to have sexual intercourse with God and as she was young and a virgin she was suitable. This marks the beginning of a Holy story, the beginning of the forgiveness of the sin of the entire human race, the beginning of a prototype to be followed by all women throughout all the centuries, the beginning of the Holy path of Jesus the Christ, the beginning of God's direct intervention in human history

² Midrash was a writing style and theoretical method of interpreting the Scriptures developed by the Rabbis in the last days before the Common Era and that practice extended up until the tenth century. Stylistically, it was a romantic and spiritual interpretation of the Talmud. Raffalovitch, I. 1962. O Midrash. . See: <http://www.tryte.com.br/judaismo/colecao/br/livro3/>.

Fourthly, “in the study of politics, power is a necessary concept” (Bolte, 1987: 264). While the author contends that this assertion is a generalization, feminist theorists and several scholars in different areas of study see it as an important ideological observation, and critical in understanding patriarchy. Religion with its mythological elements plays an important role in the imposition of political control over others. This shows in how the myth of Mary has been drawn on by the Catholic Church in the interests of shaping people’s minds and sexual behaviour throughout the centuries. Bolte’s position is shared by Ricoeur and his discussion of the relationship between myth and history. He asserted that “The concern with origins of things extends far beyond the history of gods, heroes, and ancestors. The questions pertaining to the origins of things extend to all of the entities of individual and social life” (Ricoeur, 1987: 273). Thus, in concurrence with Ricoeur’s statement, scholars have claimed that the reading of this particular mythical narrative has contributed to how women have been placed in an inferior position in society, which has developed from the early years of the church until now.

Yet, moving away from traditional religious scholarship we find that modern feminist scholars have also been critically analyzing the term myth drawing on their own theoretical stockpile. Elaine Graham writes that it is the classic task for feminist theology to expose the androcentric nature of most textual and historical sources. Feminist theology is reclaiming the canon of myths, law and narratives by challenging the authority of androcentric bias deployed to foster and uphold patriarchal authority (Graham, 1997: 113-114). Ruether states that feminist theology is constructing a theology of liberation out of patriarchy by seeking a more authentic witness of the narratives based upon an egalitarian understanding of the texts, as pioneered through a critical feminist liberation theology and methodology (Ruether, 1992).

Susan Sellers’s *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* explores the definition of myth as discussed among a variety of scholars working in different fields, stating, for example, that for Sigmund Freud myth is the projection of psychology onto the external world (Sellers, 2001: 2). Applying this to the Virgin Mary narrative, where

masculine terms and definitions come to dominate texts, it could be suggested that this is as a result of psychological projection. Robert Graves suggests that myth has the function of justifying the existing social system and to account for rites and customs (Sellers, 2001: 2). Through the analysis of the development of the Virgin Birth narrative in the church fathers we can see how they used the image of Mary to justify their political and economic interests. For Marina Warner the source of the ongoing potency of a myth is its openness that allows for the weaving of new meanings and patterns (Sellers, 2001: 2). Warner “believes that myth can operate as a lens onto human cultural in its historical and cultural context...providing the starting point for new tellings” (Sellers, 2001: 7). She suggests that myth can insight our own experiences and by scrutinizing it we can put aside its negative “strangleholds”, perhaps even engaging in the practices of the ancients by borrowing, mending, creating and tailoring our interpretations in ways that can open up our world view e.g. the Jewish tradition write style - Midrash (ibid).

1.3. The roots of the myth of the Virgin Birth – Approaching the myth through the Midrash

The Enlightenment broke with the traditional interpretation of the Bible, and brought about religious scholars with a more liberal understanding and analysis of Scripture, based on the idea of the possible restoration of society and the human spirit alike, in their different contexts. Scholars like Ruether believe that this ideological shift was important simply because the thoughts of the Enlightenment allowed us to understand that “society itself [could] be reformed to restore the original egalitarian order of nature” (Ruether 1987: 229).

Therefore, after the eighteenth century and the break with a literal interpretation of Scripture, research revealed that Hebrew writers had made use of Sumerian and Babylonian myths in order to compose their own narratives e.g. the Creation myths of the world and the human being, , Genesis 1-11. S. H. Hooke states that it is quite obvious that the Hebrews borrowed mythological material from pagan sources (Hooke, 1963:170). Ricoeur pointed out that the similarities between the early Israelite epics and the

Mesopotamian and Canaanite epics are incredible. Similarly with the constitution of court archives, lists, annals, and others documents (Ricoeur, 1987: 278). According to Ricoeur, historicized myths seem manifest into a uniquely stable style in the Old Testament narratives, “this reinterpretation of myth on the basis of history appears quite specific to the literary sphere of ancient Israel” (Ricoeur, 1987: 277). In contrast, Edmund Leach, claims that his work is based on the search for an anthropological entry point into myths, in exploring cosmogonies, and the body of ethnographical data underwriting them. Thus, in comparing myths, his intention is to seek and “distinguish [between] the variety of forms in which a single ethnographical pattern can manifest itself and then examine the nature of these variations” (Leach, 1969: 103). This task has been pursued by many Feminist Theologians, engaging various theological phenomena from different approaches, with the intention of creating new possibilities for thought and interpretation of Biblical narratives, with the ultimate aim of creating space for alternative views of society. A number of authors have contributed significantly to this field, most notably Rosemary Radford Ruether who has done inspiring work in this field and also the Anglican Bishop John Shelby Spong. A North American theologian, Ruether has plied her trade in feminist liberation theology drawing extensively on feminist methodologies, while Spong, a male feminist, has persuasively argued for the urgency of new alternatives of the Biblical interpretation for the sake of Christendom.

Ruether, in her book *Sexism and God-Talk* discusses the Midrash writing style and its role in the interpretation of the scriptures. S. J. Tambiah and Spong have also pointed out that if the Bible has to be read today our knowledge of the writing style in the early years of Christianity has to be improved. With a better understanding of the context of the early years of the Christian era we could offer a better alternative comprehension of the narratives instead of a literal and limited reading of the Scriptures (Tambiah, 2002:290). As we have already noted, Hebrew had a precedent for syncretism, borrowing from other Ancient Near Eastern religious traditions their religious resources as vehicles for their own revelation. However, the problem with accepting the Virgin Birth as a myth is its acute association with Christian dogma (Hooke, 1963: 170). Strikingly, we find a similar kind of syncretism emerging in the Latin American context, where, the relationship

between ancient religious traditional customs and present Christocentric religious practice have brought forth a veritable smorgasbord of religious variety, mainly around the image of Mary (Boff, 1987: 243).

Nonetheless as we know, among the four Gospels, only Matthew and Luke mention the narrative of the Virgin Birth. Both storytellers composed their material about fifty years after Jesus' crucifixion, during a period of social and political instability. As Ruether states "the Christian movement from its beginnings was diverse and syncretistic" (Ruether, 1998: 45). Matthew came from a Jewish heritage and Luke (or the unknown author of the Gospel of Luke) came from a gentile heritage. However according to both Ruether and Spong Gospels were strongly influenced by Jewish Midrash and the Judaic tradition (Spong, 1992:18; Ruether, 1983: 12-46). The Virgin Birth tradition more or less, as presented in the Gospels, took some ninety decades to develop, a period which today requires a closer analysis, especially in the light of the literary shifts which shaped the understanding of this tradition. According to Spong, the Gospels show many more examples of Midrash than could be based on Christian Midrash:

Midrash represented efforts on the part of the rabbis to probe, tease, and dissect the sacred story looking for hidden meanings, filling in blanks, and seeking clues to yet-to-be-revealed truth. It was the assumption of the rabbis developing the Midrash that the sacred text was timeless, that was true in the past, true in the present, and true in the future. (Spong 1992:18)

The style of Jewish Midrash was a tradition that:

The Scriptures of the antiquity could be teased, reinterpreted, and even reused until God's revelation in the present was made consistent with God's revelation in the past. More important, yesterday's understanding of Scripture was thought to illumine today's experience and, therefore, today's truth. (Spong, 1992: 137)

and encourage them to believe that Jesus was Christ, the son of God; even if they were still under the influence of the Midrash writing style (Spong, 1992: 19).

Marina Warner in her work, *Alone of All Her Sex* (1976) has raised the point that it was inevitable that the first Christians, who were Jewish people, did not recount their memories in tune with their contextual cultural circumstances, and therefore did not recognize that their religious lives were closely intertwined with their Jewish religious faith (Warner, 1976: 34-49). Hence, after one acknowledges these facts one is able to look at the narratives with more, critical eyes. I would like to reinforce this point with examples from Spong's work:

Did Jesus physically ascend, or is that a Christian Midrash retelling of the Elijah story? Did the Holy Spirit descend with a literal wind and with tongue of fire, or is that a heightened retelling of the promise of Elijah to pour his spirit out on the disciples who sees? Did Judas Iscariot go hang himself after the act of betrayal, as Matthew narrates (Matt. 27:3-10), or is that a retelling of the history of Ahithophel, who hanged himself after he had betrayed David, the shepherded King of Israel? (2 Sam. 17:23)...Did Jesus feed the multitude loaves and fishes, or is that a retelling of the story of God feeding the chosen people in the wilderness with manna? Was the raising of the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11-17) an event of history or a retelling of the story of Elijah raising the widow's son (1 Kings 17:17-24)? Was that another Elijah hint? Does the fourth Gospel perpetuate the Midrash tradition by turning the Lucan parable about Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16) into a historic narrative that asserted that Lazarus had been raised from the dead (John 11)? Again and again throughout the Gospels we are confronted by the Midrash style. One only needs the eyes to see, the mind to understand, and the tradition to enrich. (Spong, 1992: 20-21)

Assuming that the Virgin Birth narratives are illustrative of Christian Midrash, then the only fact that we can be sure of is that Jesus was born. Based on this Feminist

Theologians, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, claim that Scriptures have been used to perpetuate the oppression of women as it was written on the basis of a patriarchal mindset. Fiorenza believes that one cannot look to the biblical witness itself through the central norm of the Christian faith (Fiorenza, 1983: 32). However Boff (1987) sees the symbolism of the Virgin Mary today as a psychological means of exposing “The Maternal Face of God”. However in reference to the example of a feminist theology of liberation in the Latin America context, as we shall return to in chapter three, this narrative has been used as an attempt to liberate and empower women by theologians such the Brazilians Ivone Gebara, Maria Clara Bingemer and Leonardo Boff (Coacley, 1992: 102). Nonetheless, for Spong and several other scholars, Jesus of Nazareth’s birth probably was not noted by anyone other than Mary. Mary’s labour was real; there were contractions, blood, and an umbilical cord. Jesus’ birth was as human as any other, in another words the opposite of the Catholics dogmas and beliefs (Spong, 1992: 22). According to numerous scholars if the adult life of Jesus of Nazareth did not cry out for an explanation, there would not be any reason for the creation of the Birth narrative. The Virgin Birth narrative only appears in the ninth decade of the Christian era, it took years to be developed, therefore when the storytellers wrote it down they did so with emotion, shaped by the spirituality of those times (Spong, 1992: 22).

1.4. Ancient traditional understandings of Virgin Births

The perspective taken in this section will focus on the historical processes’ hypotheses that have given rise to the cult of Mary. Susan Sellers in explaining Lévi-Strauss’ view about myth states that:

The units of myth only make sense if they are read in conjunction with other ‘mythemes’. He argues that we must read a myth as we would a musical score, since we can only understand its components if we consider their relation to what is happening at other levels. (Sellers, 2001: 34)

The liberation theologian Leonardo Boff in his book *The Maternal Face of God*, analyses the origins of the cult of Mary, explaining that as Christianity took root in Hellenistic culture, it was naturally influenced by the mythology of Greek culture and “as we know” Greek mythology has a “whole colourful gallery of goddesses, under countless titles” (Boff, 1987: 218). This meant according to Boff, that when the pagan devotees of the goddesses and virgins were converted to Christianity, they merely supplanted Mary for goddesses known by other titles; in other words they infused their Hellenistic spirituality with their understanding of the Christian Mary. He writes that many times they would even hold on the same statues of the goddesses, often merely just changing the name (ibid)³. Boff explored the substitution of Hera’s devotion to Mary, the mythical symbol by a “true reality” –Virgin and Mother. Though, Michael P. Carroll maintains that the shift occurred between the unique association from Cybele, a Phrygian goddess whom the Romans worshiped as the Magna Mater (“Great Mother”) to Mary, the woman that gave birth to Jesus Christ and perpetuated virginity (Carroll, 1986: 10).

It is important to point out, however, that currently a prominent analytical theme amongst feminists is the transgressive potential of women mystics and prophetesses. Among them, these features are used as a common core in reconstructing gender identity. This way feminine mysticism is considered a free space from the colonialist tyranny of patriarchy, hence becoming a positive source for the production and articulation of alternative discourses. As Graham mentions, feminists are re-enacting the central event of the tradition, deploying words and symbols and connecting it with the rhythms of every day life (Graham, 1997: 115). The same re-enacting is taking place today into the multivalent symbol of the Madonna today development, for example in the image of the black Madonna or the indigenes Madonna, etc.

As Sellers points out, Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor’s archaeological research has revealed that some of the earliest focal points of religious devotion were cosmic mothers

³ In his book Boff continues with this approach using rich historical facts to show how Mary symbolically gradually over took these Roman and Hellenistic goddesses over the centuries as the prime feminine symbol amongst believers (Boff, 1987: 218-219).

(Sellers, 2001: 17). As another feminist author put it, “[o]verwhelming evidence exists that the early Cult of Mary was in continuity with the worship of ancient earth mothers and fertility goddesses of the pre-Christian era” (Hamington, 1995: 11). As a result, Marian piety was a direct continuation of ancient goddess cults. Significantly, then, the hypotheses presented here have enabled us to account for a number of points closely related to this broad argument.

During the early years of the Christian era, there was an ‘atmosphere of mystery’ (Rahner 1963:18). A salient problem in the Hellenic ideological mission was the necessity of making the Christian gospel credible and acceptable to others, and the mythic portrayal of a virgin impregnated by a god and who gives birth to a hero formed a central prong in this ideo-mythological arsenal. Thus, according to Ricoeur the intellectual world of Christianity with respect to mythology was in many respects merely a continuation of what the Greeks had originally generated. The Greek thinkers with their unique Hellenistic piety influenced and shaped many cultures around the Western world. The allegorical and rational explanations mixed with deities intrusions in history abounded for centuries (Ricoeur, 1987:268).

In many other cultures, myths of virgin births also fostered unique cults and traditions. It seems to have been a potent religious symbol, as in most cases it served the functional purpose of explaining the divine origin of heroic figures. For instance, many examples can be found in the extinct civilizations of ancient civilisations. In most of these stories a hero was born to a virgin that came into contact with a natural object or phenomenon, for instance a piece of clay, a feather, a ray of sun, which contained powerful divine force. For example, “the Toltec and Aztec hero Quetzalcoatl was conceived when his mother, Chimalman, was breathed upon by God, who had taken the form of morning” (Christ, 1987: 273). Other example can be found with a variety of religious traditions:

Gautama Buddha, the ninth Avatar of India, was said to have been born of the virgin Maya about 600 B.C.E. The Holy Ghost was also portrayed as descending upon her.

Horus, a god of Egypt, was born of the virgin Isis, it was said, around 1550 B.C.E. Horus also received gifts from three kings in his infancy.

Attis was born of a virgin mother named Nama in Phrygia, before 200 B.C.E.

Quirinus, a Roman saviour, was born of a virgin in the sixth century B.C.E. His death, it was said, was accompanied by universal darkness.

Indra was born of a virgin in Tibet in the eighth century B.C.E. He also was said to have ascended into heaven.

Adonis, a Babylonian deity, was said to have been born of a virgin mother named Ishtar, who was later to be hailed as queen of heaven.

Mithra, a Persian deity, was also said to have been born of a virgin around 600 B.C.E.

Zoroaster likewise made his earthly appearance courtesy of a virgin mother.

Krishna, the eighth Avatar of the Hindu pantheon, was born of the virgin Devaki around 1200 B.C.E. (ibid)

According to Leeming, the Christian virgin-birth story is but one version of the universal story of the birth of the eternal king, which came to the world through divine interference. For example, in the nativity story Luke tells us that Joseph went to Bethlehem with Mary, who was pregnant, to be taxed there as decreed by Augustus. As there was no room for them in the inn they were forced to stay in a stable and the time for her to have the baby came and Mary gave birth to her first born and laid him down in the manger (Luke 2:7). The stable, like Dionysus' cave, the myrrh tree that served as the birth vessel for Adonis, and also the sacred grove of the Buddha's birth, are all different examples of the same story. Matthew completes the nativity story narrating with the visit of the Magi. The Magi similarly reminds us of the astrologers and magicians who appear in the stories of Zarathushtra and "Krishna and who came, like The Magi, from the East in search of a King" (Leeming, 1987:275).

However, many feminist theologians have maintained the point that the firm belief in the literal virgin birth of Jesus, as being the validation for the birth of Christ, was upheld and perhaps virtually enforced by classical Neoplatonic thought which was widespread at the time. The early doctrine of original sin, which was related to carnal conception, was originated by this school. According to Pamela Dickey Young, Neoplatonism is the intellect/soul's longing "to be separated from the body, which drags it down from its true spiritual home with God" (2004: 168). The narrative was important to overcome the fact that Jesus did not sin, and that he was not born in sin, because his mother was a virgin, which widely translated into physical as well as spiritual purity. At the other extreme, however, this kind of interpretation strongly intimates that the "Christian tradition [is] associated [with] maleness with mind and soul as superior, and femaleness with body [as being] inferior" (ibid).

It becomes abundantly clear, in the view of many scholars, that the rich mythology of the virgin births of ancient heroes from different traditions, have played an important role in shaping the writing, as well as the interpretation of the birth narrative of Jesus of Nazareth's. There is overwhelming proof that the Jewish narrative of divine creation was strongly influenced by neighbouring pagan sources (Hooke, 1963: 172). Thus, it is possible that the Virgin Birth narrative is also influenced by pagan sources outside the Jewish tradition. However as we have seen, these miraculous births were not unusual among the Hebrew literal tradition, if one looks at the Old Testament narratives he/she will find angels', annunciations of important figures, in the stories of Samson, Samuel and Isaac's story. If the Hebrew textual tradition could elaborate upon miraculous birth narratives of people that played important roles during their adult lives, why would they not do the same about the birth narrative of the man who was believed to be the son of God?

The history of birth narratives seems to suggest that they were developed around and for figures who became prominent during their adult lives, as they acquired powerful religious importance amongst their people. Thus, as the birth narratives took root, the language and importance of its character grew with it. Ruether states that "Christianity, in

successive stages, appropriated a great variety of both Jewish and Hellenistic religious symbols to interpret Jesus” (Ruether, 1983: 14). Although, drawing on Spong, I do not believe Matthew and Luke intentionally tried to misinform readers. They used the material they had at their disposal to recount the most important religious event from their world view, about a hero and a divine saviour. As a result they gave us one of the most powerful myths throughout history (Spong, 1992; 57-60).

1.5. The development of the myth by the fathers of the church

According to Hamington the role-defined images of Mary e.g. The Virgin Mary; the Mediatrix; or Mary, the new Eve are underwritten by “a particular historical setting, a set of social values, and a theological logic” (Hamington 1995: 9). “It is my assertion that these views come from erroneous ideologically committed readings of culturally determined text, interpreted as though the culture of the Bible is God’s decreed culture” (Jodamus, 2005: 5).

The above statement provides an apt synopsis of the kinds of issues I hope to explore in the following section. For example, it has been shown that feminist criticism has disclosed classical theology, believing that it was probably not Matthew’s intention to write history or be a purely biographical writer, and that finally the entire narrative of Jesus’ birth was Christian Midrash. According to Spong the narrative was written to interpret the adult life of Jesus in a way that could religiously nourish first-century Christians (Spong, 1992:75). However, the church fathers of the second and third century were not familiar with the Midrash tradition. In most cases, they used the scriptures literally, often interpreting verses out of context, as well as stridently and fallaciously demanded a literal reading of the text. In effect, what they thought to be God’s revelation to humankind became a defence against the “enemies of Christianity”, against those who raised their voices and asked probing questions about the meaning of Jesus’ teaching, his roots, his origins, relevance and deity. Therefore “virginal conception” became a powerful tool, a useful miracle in the defence against those who did not accept Jesus as divine (Spong, 1992:75). Matthew and Luke could not have imagined the extent to which

their original message would be distorted by the church fathers, in their attempts to emphasize their own understanding of the Scripture. From the second century until the nineteenth century the church described the virgin birth as a literal and undoubted fact of history. Biology and theology was remarkably bound up together (Spong, 1992:75).

Given the patriarchal structure of the time, it was inevitable that the Christian mind set would conform to its shape, principles, and structure. (Young, 2004: 161-165). Gradually, through the years, no further female deities were accommodated into Christianity and the male-God, the male-Son and the Holy Spirit, which originally were not gendered, started to take on more and more significant roles within the faith. In the early years of Christianity the followers faced protests against that whole male structure and the prevailing masculine image of God. Yet there were critical voices, the Gnostics challenged the patriarchal interpretation arguing that the Spirit, a central tenet of the holy trinity, was a feminine energy, using as their argument the Hebrew understanding of the *sofia* which meant wisdom, which in fact derived from the feminine. However, this approach was taken as heresy and the feminine understanding of God was banned by church orthodoxy. As God's masculinity was concretized, Christianity now formally began its religious journey (Spong, 1992: 201-209).

I have gone to great lengths to explain the early years of Christianity in order to address some of the historical roots' and hypotheses that provoked and stimulated the development of Marian devotion based on the Virgin Birth narrative. Yet after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Christianity was proliferated into the gentile world thereby loosing the Jewish mooring to guide it. This meant a shift from a Jewish literal tradition to a Mediterranean Neoplatonic thought structure.

Neo-Platonism was a philosophy that maintained that human nature was constituted by lower and higher levels, with the lower connected to animal appetites of the flesh which was considered evil; sexuality therefore was interpreted as being of the flesh and therefore evil. It also emphasized that "Ideas" should be separated from "substance"; and "mind" from "body", thus the higher level of human nature was associated with the

aspirations of soul and spiritual thoughts, resulting in the thought that it was the ultimate good (Spong, 1992: 208; Young, 2004:169; Ruther, 1983: 244).

According to Spong and Ruether, Jesus' very humanity had to be defended in the given context, and the role played by his mother became a struggle. Christians were facing a "new terrain of struggle" and they used what they had at their disposal to defend their faith. Hence, the Christians of the first century used the storytellers' narratives, the ones written under the influence of Midrash, as a literal source to be used strictly according to the masculine perspective. Undeniably, there was a dire need for Mary to be defined within this religiously volatile environment; and as we know; only men were invited to participate in this process of definition. In this way Mary and the virtues attributed to her were governed by male standards and to be understood as unquestionable female values. Mary became the mother that was pure, the virgin who was obedient, resulting in a sexless person dehumanized throughout history. This male dominated interpretation of Mary's narrative became a significant weapon in the hands of the church, shaping and dictating women's behaviour throughout the years (Hamington 1995: 16- 29; Ruther, 1983: 150-151, 244; Spong, 1992: 201-209). As we shall return to in the following chapter, Mary even "provided protection and righteous religious legitimation for the Spanish and Portuguese in their sixteenth century conquest and colonization of the Americas" (Hamington 1995: 16).

Mary's *in partu* virginity, referring to her virginity both before and after birth, was a major concern for the early church. As Michael P. Carroll has shown, it was an issue addressed by all the great theologians of the period. In the Catholic tradition Mary is considered to be a perpetual virgin which implies three distinct things. Mary was (or is) a perpetual virgin: before, during and after Jesus' birth. It refers to the belief that Mary was a "triple virgin": First, Jesus was conceived by a divine intervention and without sexual intercourse; second, Mary's "maidenhead" was never ruptured even though she gave birth; third, she abstained from sexual intercourse even after Jesus' birth (Carroll, 1986: 6-7). According to Warner, the need for the definitions of doctrines and scriptural commentaries that would satisfactorily overcome the demands and ascetic pressures of

the first century was overwhelming. Christianity found in virginity a most satisfying image for Christ (Warner, 1976: 59). Consequently, the interpretation of original sin and its roots played an important role in Christendom's development of the creeds. Therefore it also became one of the most important topics discussed within Christian Feminist Theology in unmasking oppression and androcentrism within Christianity (Maluleke, 2000: 205-206). Here, I would like to briefly introduce the theological influences that birthed the oppressive reading of such myth.

Irenaeus, a second-century Christian theologian was according to Jean Laporte "the great theologian of Mary"; his argument is that Irenaeus sees Mary as part of the salvific plan of God. He developed the complex Pauline parallel of the two Adams; he gave support to the conception of dualism that was developed through the centuries within classical Christian theology. In other words, he used Paul's understanding of Jesus as being the second Adam and drew the parallel between Mary and Eve as well. However, according to Warner, Irenaeus and Justin Martyr "in different milieux and seemingly independently, picked up and extend[ed] the Pauline idea to include the Virgin Mary" (Warner, 1976: 59). The first man was borne from the virgin mother earth, which was not yet corrupted, and the second "Adam", Jesus, came from the virgin womb of Mary (Laporte, 1982: 152; Holness, 2001:115-136; Warner, 1976: 59).

Through the discussion of this dualistic parallel Ruether and Spong anthropologically approach classical patriarchal theology, stating that Eve was the first woman to sin. Through her, sin became implicit in the human condition. After Eve intentionally induced her husband to commit the same mistake she did, they committed the first sexual act⁴. Their heir was borne in sin, and consequently as the consequences of her own decision, as a result of their punishment and banishment from paradise by God. From that moment men were expected to work to provide for the "fragile sex" a means of survival in the world. Women, due to their aptness to sin and their surrender to the serpent, would have

⁴ According to Irenaeus Adam did not know sex until he was banished from the Garden of Eden. "Childbirth, the result of Adam's "knowing," was part of Eve's punishment. Sex, guilt, sin, and punishment were coming together in a way that was to defy any power to separate them for almost two thousand years." (Spong, 1992:210)

labour pains as their punishment during “childbirth” as a reminder of bringing sin into the world. Within this type of logic, sex became connected only to reproduction, and according to the fathers of the church it featured as the primary symbol of sin for humankind (Ruether 1983: 94-95, 150-151; Spong, 1992: 210)

Schussler-Fiorenza's asserts that the source of women's oppression throughout the centuries, as well as the reason of their oppression in within different contexts such as racial, classist, religious, etc, is in fact due to the theology of sin developed by the fathers of the church (Schussler-Fiorenza, 1993: 55). According to her the patriarchal interpretation of the Scriptures distorted the understanding of the Biblical myth, and brought oppression resulting in a hypocritical society where men's' authority was based on their andocentric hermeneutics (ibid). Ruether points out that this myth signifies the more ultimate human endeavour to transcend the human condition. This was an attempt to transcend sex through interpreting it as the worst sin (Ruether, 1983: 150-151). Women became the symbol of evil within society. People were being taught that sex was only for reproduction; the pleasure in the act was evil, dirty and should be avoided at all costs. Ironically, women were used to invoke this desire, as Eve made Adam give in by seducing him. Male society conveniently started to blame women for being the cause of sin and of their surrender, their scapegoat for their own mistakes (Ruether, 1983: 150-151; Spong, 1992: 210-211).

To reassert this dualism, the virgin birth became the perfect means through which church leaders could teach women proper behaviour, and as a result it stressed negative attitudes toward women and toward sexuality (Young, 2004: 168). Mary was the contrast of Eve, she was the holy virgin that was obedient and docile to God the Father, through her salvation became available to the entire human race, as she reversed the effect of Eve (Ruether, 1983: 150). “Eve turned away from God in rebellion; Mary listened, responded, and received God into herself. Eve was sexual and evil. Mary was sexless and good. The disobedience of one virgin was set right by the obedience of another virgin” (Spong, 1992: 210). Mary became a woman without sexual organs, without passionate feelings, without desire, a sexless person. Androcentric theology, through placing serious

emphasis on conception through divine revelation rather than sexual union, replaced her sexual organs with an ear, in effect suggesting that Jesus was conceived through her ear. (Hamington, 1995: 57; Warner, 1976: 37). Mary listened to God's words, in a submissive behaviour without questioning them; even though she knew that she might have been socially discredited because she was unmarried she obeyed.

The preservation of the sexless image of Mary provided a good foundation for teaching about the sexless image of Jesus, the one that was born without sin and did not sin. Hence, at the same time mounting a strong theological defence against Gnosticism, who condemned beliefs in the flesh and the incarnation, that were rife as a result of Neoplatonic cultural thought (Ruether, 1998: 150- 151; Spong, 1992: 210-211; Laporte, 1982: 152; Hamington, 1995: 14-15).

According to Carroll, the reason Mary's virginity was considered such an important issue in the early Church was due to a strong Christological theology (Carroll 1986: 7). In one classical interpretations of "The Virgin Birth of Christ" the theologian J. Gresham Machen states that "At the end of the second century the Virgin Birth of Christ was regarded as an absolutely essential part of Christian belief by the Christian church in all parts of the world" (Machen, 1930: 3). However as we mentioned above theologians such as Boff affirm that this was not a difficult concept to sink into the in popular mind, since; Mary was merely a continuation of the cult of the goddess Hera (Boff, 1987: 219) and Hamington states that "previous goddess worshipers merely supplanted or infused their spirituality with the Christian Mary" (Hamington, 1995: 11). According to both theologians this transposition and its amplification was fostered by the church fathers since, "in exchange for tolerating widespread devotion to Mary, the church received a greater following" (ibid). The image of Mary helped to convert pagans to Christianity and provided a means of consolidating power for the church (Hamington, 1995: 13).

Hamington's *Hail Mary?* Provides a rich study of how Marian devotion developed over the centuries. According to him during the fourth century the number of festivals dedicated to Mary started increasing and a number of new myths started emerging.

Hamington points out that these various festivals celebrated various aspects of Mary, including her virginity and motherhood. Though, the “dark ages were a period of maintenance, not growth for the church and Mary” (1995: 14). Carroll maintains, however, that Catholic commentators seem willing to admit that popular devotion did not become widespread until the later part of the fifth century, with more focussed devotion increasing over the centuries achieving its apogee in the eleventh and twelfth century (Carroll, 1986: 4-5).

Carroll traces the increasing focus on Marian devotion in the fifth century to the Council of Ephesus (C.E. 431) where Mary was proclaimed to be the *Theotokos*, which means “God-Bearer” or “Mother of God”; this title became a theological consistency that held out unique political utility for the church. They used Mary as a tool to defend a one dimensional Christology and yet ironically usurping the focus of their discussion at the same time .i.e. Mary’s devotion as sweeping up support among the less educated populace. At the Council of Chalcedon Mary was declared *Aeiparthenos*, or ever-Virgin, while in an amazing development two hundred years after, at the Fourth Lateran Council, Mary’s virginity reached the status of dogma which marked the culmination of the Mary cult (Carroll, 1986: 5-6; Hamington, 1995: 11-29). In the eight centuries after, Mary’s role exceeded the churches expectations, and she became the *mediatrix*, the mother that had influence over God’s will. This concept of Mary flourished widely and eventually developed into Mary becoming what is known as the *coredemptrix*. Mary and Jesus were put a par in terms of their importance for the salvation of the human race. This Christotypical attribution contributed to Marian devotion persisting as a powerful intercessor up until the modern day (Hamington, 1995: 15-16).

By the fourth and fifth centuries, the fathers of the church such as Augustine, Aquinas, Ambrose, or Jerome, made the association between “maleness with mind and soul as superior, and femaleness with body as inferior” (Young, 2004: 168). This dualistic root set the Christian tradition against women and sexuality. Sexuality had become a threat and an object of revulsion to the fathers of the church who “could not control [their] own sexual urges” (Young, 2004: 168), but instead they blamed women, who were in fact

considered responsible for sin in the world (Ruether, 1983: 94-95). In her paper on “Christianity”, Ruether discusses how in many situations male theology “buttresses” a variety of insinuations around the view that “wom[e]n [are], in fact, morally, ontologically, and intellectually the inferior to the male. Her subordination is not merely one of social office, but of actual inferiority...Moreover, her inferiority leads to sin when she acts independently” (Ruether, 1987: 208-209; 1974 167-169). Continuing this line of argument, she points out that the main premise of this theology which she calls a “Theology of subordination” is the “scapegoating of woman for the origin of sin”⁵ (Ruether, 1987: 209). Pamela Dickey Young points out that Augustine was probably one of the stronger proponents of such patriarchal dualistic views. Augustine, who, “before his conversion to Christianity, had both a concubine and a son. But after his conversion he renounced sexuality and, insofar as possible, the company of women” (Young, 2004: 168), due to his dualistic interpretation of Adam/Eve and how original sin could be transmitted to each new generation through weakness of human will. Thus, the Virgin Mary who was understood to have no lust, no sex, became his model for a pure Christian living (Young, 2004: 168). In agreement, Ruether’s research in the field of patriarchal anthropology also states that Augustine was the classical source of this pattern for both Catholic and Protestants (Ruether, 1983: 95).

Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, continued the Augustinian tradition although he also adopted the Aristotelian philosophy of women to be “misbegotten male[s]” and defined women through asserting their biological inferiority. The German Theologian Ranke-Heinemanns has persuasively argued that Augustine and Aquinas deductions, that Mary must have given birth without labour pains since she had “conceived” without the shaming sin of sexual pleasure, generated the church’s dehumanization of both Jesus and Mary, thereby bringing a curse over humanity, oppressing people and enabling the subjugation of women throughout the years (Ranke-Heinemanns 1995; Warner, 1976: 43).

⁵ See Ruether (1987: 207-210) for further delineation of this.

According to Ruether, Aquinas' theology, despite giving support to the "theology of subordination" it also supported and underwrote notions of class hierarchy and slavery. According to Aquinas belief in class hierarchy was necessary for social order. For him, these servile relations had become necessary because of sin, though it was also part of the natural order created by God, otherwise Aquinas could not place what could be God's reason to create such an inferior creature (Ruether, 1983: 96-97). Mary the virgin mother became the prototype of docile obedience, her virginity was the contrast of carnal lust that was associated with childbirth (Spong, 1992: 211).

Young's *"Women in Christianity"* articulates that one can see through the historical narratives a constant male desire to dominate and control women. She notes that celibacy and virginity became a highly prized value in Christianity. Although only after the fifth century celibacy was enforced for male clergy, women that chose a virginal life would be taken in and were considered "to be more like men" (Young, 2004: 169). The Virgin Birth shifted from a narrative ideal of virginity and celibacy "to moral doctrine that transformed the mother goddess like the Virgin Mary into an effective instrument of asceticism and female subjugation" (Warner, 1976: 49).

Later, during medieval times, Hamington points out that the newly emerging concept of courtly love added a new facet to the Mary's mythological role (1995: 16). Ruether mentions that during the eleventh and twelfth century's a few historical developments were significant, stating that Mariological femininity in bourgeois Catholicism and even into Protestantism (sixteenth century) was partly secularized to characterize the ideal nature of women; Mary became a model of womanhood to be romantically and civilly pursued (1983, 104-105).

During the protestant reformation a slight change occurred in theological teaching, Luther advocated for the positive value of marriage, though women were still considered the property of their husbands, and their subjugation the punishment for her sin (Blancy, Jourjon and The Dombes Group, 2002:31). Women's inferiority was lumped on her original fall and it was an expression of divine justice (Ruether, 1983: 97). The Calvinist

tradition was however somewhat different, however it didn't deviate markedly from the generally oppressive theological trend up until that time. For Calvin, society was upheld by a strict set of social hierarchies, for example rulers over subjects, masters over servants, husbands over wives, parents over children; authority and subordination was a matter of social office. Not because one is superior to the other, but because that was God's establishment for good order in society. Men and Women should humbly accept their place in this order; women should be willing to do so as a good mother and wife. According to Ruether, the:

Calvinist tradition tries to turn male domination and female subordination into a positivist, legal order of creation... And any effort to change this order and give woman equality with man would itself be a sinful rebellion against God's divinely enacted ordinances of creation and redemption (Ruether, 1983: 98-99).

Elisabeth Schüssler's *Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision* similarly deal with the historical processes discussed in this thesis, and women's inferiority in society as a result of an oppressive theological legacy.

This oppressive patriarchal theology was the fruit of the fathers of the church's misogynistic miss-reading of the myth of the Virgin Birth under the influence of Neoplatonism. The narrative was written to overcome a different religious context than the one lived in the patristic time. Even so, this theological perspective, underwritten by a particular reading of the myth, had casted women into being perceived as the inferior of the male and it was passed on to other continents and contexts by the conquistadores or *bandeirantes*⁶ and imposed upon the conquered people's beliefs and culture. Through the next chapter we will approach the Latin America context and the results of such theology in their societal and religious lives.

⁶ Portuguese word for crusades.

Chapter 2

Introduction

Phenomenologists of religion in general are in agreement about how belief in the Virgin Mary and the implications of the Virgin Birth's traditional reading developed with unique characteristics in the Latin American context. The Liberation Theologian Virgil Elizondo states that Marian devotion is unquestionably the most "persistent and original" Christian characteristic amongst the Latin America populace. It has featured distinctly in Latin American religious life since the origins of the "New World" (Elizondo, 1984: 22).

In this chapter I will be looking at how the Marian devotion took place in Latin America context; how it developed and how the traditional reading of the Virgin Birth narrative has negatively influenced the position of women both inside and outside of the church.

2.1. Historical Background

European Background

Towards the end of the XV century when the Spanish and Portuguese arrived in the Americas, "the conquerors were instructed to act as messengers of Christianity" (Chidester, 2000: 355). The Virgin Mary's symbol played an important role in the hands of the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors; she was regarded their most sacred protector. At the same time, she provided righteous religious legitimation for their doing (Hamington, 1995: 18).

At the time, Christian European faith was emerging from the middle ages, shaking off some of the religious and ideological shackles like barbarism (Aquino, 1994: 13-14). During this period, European Mariolatry slowly allowed for the increasing dominance of a spiritual perspective over one focused on the material world. Women became easy prey

for impassionate religious contempt; when they made moves towards independence or questioned male authority it would be regarded as religious transgression (Hamington, 1995: 17-18).

The Eve/Mary dualism, which was strongly a part of traditional European/Hellenistic theology, made it easy to use Mary's purity as a tool to teach women's position in societal context. Women were perceived as weak, inferior and sexually greedy. Hence, Mary's purity came to function as a yardstick against which the apparently salacious behaviour of ordinary women was measured; it became a tool for scouting out women who did not match Mary's behaviour and her perceived piety. Women who did not match her religious standards were accused of satanic activities (Ruether, 1987: 226). In Catholicism, Mary was used as a powerful tool not only for wielding power but also for retaining it in the social sphere's extending beyond the church into the political and economic contexts (Young, 2004: 177).

The European traditional reading of the Virgin Birth narrative and consequently the Marian cult was a historical process used to further legitimize patriarchal religion and oppression over women in colonized countries such as Latin America (Young, 2004: 175-176). Accounting for the European church's theology at the time, Hamington has concluded that Mary's elevated religious position formed a kind of unreachable higher pedestal that made it "easy for those caught up in religious zeal to find fault with ordinary women" (Hamington, 1995: 17).

It is important to point out that over the course of the centuries, Catholic doctrine as well the church's leadership has been configured in a hierarchical order where its truth and authority could not be questionable. From the fifteenth century a number of teachings developed from nonbiblical religious traditions were incorporated into the highest level of church doctrine. The Marian doctrine, although having no biblical source, is the best example of this reality. It has been a characteristic of the Catholic Church to incorporate popular traditions into their dogmas (Boff 1987: 208-243). Upon deeper analysis into this

the pluralistic nature of Marian dogmatic development, mentioned in chapter one, emerges more clearly.

Latin American Background

The theological outlook brought by the conquistadors was used to achieve the economic interest of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns. Mary was strongly regarded as the colonizers great protector, “a crusade to which the explorers were religiously dedicated” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987: 129). Her primary concern was indigenous salvation, which had to be conducted through conversion to faith in her Son; hence, the conquest was regarded as Mary’s own work (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987; 129).

Iberian Catholic practitioners viewed their beliefs as the only way to heaven. Consequently the work of converting indigenes to the Christian faith was regarded as important as the conquering of new lands (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987: 129). It was regarded as one of the most important tasks of the conquest: “increasing the number of Christians meant increasing of the number of the King’s subjects” (ibid). As we know these view points were interrelated throughout the sixteenth century Christendom.

According to David Chidester, in his *Christianity – A Global History*, Christian strategies during conquest was at first an interreligious engagement, subsequently it was about the demonization of the native faith, and was followed by the destruction of the “threat”, eventually culminating in the appropriation of the lands, the people and their beliefs (Chidester, 2000: 353 – 358). “This style of action was repeated throughout Latin America during the period of conquest” (Chidester, 2000: 358; Elizondo, 1984: 23).

Indigenous religion was considered evil. Hence, on behalf of Christianity’s purity it was violently destroyed and “replaced by the more civilized Christianity” (Hamington 1995: 16). Chidester contends that Spanish priests rejected any intercultural translations that started to take place between Christian beliefs and indigenous. Their beliefs were simply imposed on indigenous Americans. However, “the indigenous response to Christianity

was neither outright rejection nor the total acceptance... Between rejection and acceptance, indigenous people negotiated distinctive forms of local Christianity” (Chidester, 2000 360). As a result of this is that Mary was assimilated into natives existing worship of the mother-goddess, and “ironically, a deep devotion to Mary was subsequently fostered in Latin America, spread by the legendary appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe near Mexico City in 1531” (Hamington, 1995: 16).

The consequences of oppression and the Guadalupe Virgin

It is in the example of the Guadalupe Virgin which we see the complexity of the discourses and theological strategies coming to life. In this case, the oppressive results of the conquistadores and missionaries’ work in Latin America will be charted using the work of one of the CEHILA⁶’s projects, “A Mulher Pobre na Historia da Igreja Latino-Americana” (Translated as The poor women in the history of the Latin American church)⁷ by Virgilio Elizondo (1983).

According to Elizondo the violence and violation of indigenous people at the arrival of the Catholic Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors and missionaries gave space for a process of extermination, slavery and exploitation to a degree for which it is hard to find a similar equivalent in history (Elizondo, 1983: 23).

According to his argument, the process of conquest gave origin to oppression in four spheres of Latin American society:

Political-economic: the impositions in changing the indigenous life-style and “government in favour of the powerful and to the detriment of the conquered”, gave

⁶ In the 1970 a group of Latin Christian scholars developed a broad project on the history of the church in Latin America – CEHILA (center of studies of the church in Latin America). As a result of their projects we can find a number of articles and books on a variety of matters concern to the development of the church and the impact of its theology in Latin America.

⁷ My own translation.

origin to a group of people that was rejected by society; it feed the prejudice against the indigenous peoples throughout the centuries (Elizondo, 1983: 23).

Sexual discrimination, Rape and Violence against native women marked the birth, and therefore, the development of Latin America (Elizondo, 1983: 24; Aquino, 1994: 14).

This is the way the Mexicans died, the *tlateloica*. They left their city deserted... and we had nothing to eat and we ate nothing. And all night long it rained on us... This was when people began to leave the town and when they left they went in rags and the women's buttocks were almost naked. And from all sides Christians chased them. They pulled open their skirts, they handled them all over, their ears, their breasts, their hair...and they also took them by force, they chose those women with white skin, those with fair skin, those with fair bodies. And at the time of the attack some women covered their faces with mud and put on rags. (León-Portilla quoted in Aquino, 1994: 14)

Socio-psychological: this suppression was also felt at a socio-psychological level since the native people were made to feel morally inferior. They had to remain slaves that only listened to their masters, learn from them and obey in silence; this structure of relations influenced local identities throughout centuries (ibid).

Religious: the ambiguity of the missionaries' behaviour made the natives cry out. At the same time that they would give their own lives to defend the indigenous peoples, they annihilated the natives' religious culture. The missionaries believed that the indigenous gods were diabolical. Yet even after their conversion to Christianity they were oppressed by the Christians. The natives' assimilation of the Christian faith was considered threatening due the syncretism that was taking place; besides there are no reports that indigenous people took part in theological engagement in the Americas (ibid).

In addition, the Virgin was retracted as being at the conquistadors' side and against the pagans' idols. Locals were told that the Virgin was at the conquistadors' side, even in their cruel efforts to convert the indigenous to their faith. The Spaniards considered and taught that their work was approved and blessed by the Virgin Mary (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 130-131). However, only "with the second generation of the conquest, [did] veneration of Mary begin to become an integral part of the customs of Spanish and Portuguese America" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 131). After the mass destruction of the indigenous people, their social life and culture, the process of syncretism started to take place. In other words, the conquered people started to adapt and merge their dominators' cultural beliefs with their own indigenous religious resources, with its mother-goddesses and other deities (ibid).

Nonetheless, the devotion to Mary did not take place easily amongst the local people; it was a process of integration "rather similar to the procedure of early Christianity, where the practice was to Christianize pagans' customs and temples and then use them" (Gebara, 1989: 132). Rubén Ugarte (in Gebara, 1989) shows the moralizing and civilizing aspects of the elements of the colonizers' faith that was brought along and was merged into the indigenous mindset:

Mary is an idea so sublime and yet so much in tune with our being that loving her and devotion to her cannot but awaken feeling of sensitivity and nobility and the highest aspirations even in the most uncultivated hearts, disposing the soul for the exercise of virtue... This ideal of the Virgin was able to attract the attention of the poor inhabitants of our most remote regions...It inspired them with an affection that softened their costumes, that made their labours less harsh, and even made their isolation less lonely. Mary even influenced their art, so that with their rustic instruments they addressed to her the sweetest sounds, and their rough hands shaped stone and wood and erected carvings in granite and cedar that today amaze those who visit her shrines. (131)

As a result of the oppression a Christian Latin America, with its own style, rose in that context, “between rejection and acceptance, indigenous people negotiated distinctive forms of local Christianity” (Chidester, 2000:360).

A good example of the integration of Christian dogmas into the indigenous life is the shrine on Mount Tepeyac, in Mexico. A local inhabitant, Juan Diego, had a vision of a Beautiful Lady, she was shining as sun lights, she talked to him in their own language, she called him her son and spoke about how she loved him. The Lady revealed herself as Mary the Virgin Mother of the true God. She told him how precious he and his people were, and that she would protect every one that would come to that place to worship her. She gave instructions to build a church in that place for her worship; in exchange she would hear all the prayers made to her and give counsel to all that would seek for her help. Now Juan Diego, as her messenger should go and tell the local bishop what had happened and give to him her instructions. Interestingly that was the same destination of pilgrimages to the goddess Tonantzin-Cihuacóatl. “mother-earth” (Gebara, 1983: 145-146; Elizondo, 1984: 24-25). “Guadalupe therefore occupies a privileged place in Latin America Mariology, for it means basically that the Virgin adopts the “natives” of Mexico as their mother and with them adopts the Latin American people as a whole” (Gebara, 1989: 144).

The event on Mount Tepeyac provides us with a bridge to understand why the Virgin Mary has such important place in the Latin American Christian context. According to Elizondo, Guadalupe dignified the native; the event inverted the indigenous function in their context. The Virgin merged the Christian teachings with the indigenous world; she brought a new Gospel to them. She unified the two religions and made the natives the messenger of this new understanding. Her message and the worship to Her and Her Son was no longer a privilege of the conquistadors. The Virgin showed that there were no class differences before Her eyes. The Guadalupe event provided the Latin Americans with the first chance to re-interpret the Biblical narratives. What the missionaries had tried to teach the people for such a long time was fast assimilated when it was told by the Virgin with the natives own words and mindset (Elizondo, 1984: 22-35). A new reading

was born, a new interpretation of the scriptures, of the Virgin narratives, a new “Midrash”, that was now wholly Latin American.

For Lozano-Díaz, in the same way that the early Christians, under the Greek influence, opened the doors to a new reading of the scriptures; the Mexican people provided through Guadalupe new ways to re-interpret God and His features (Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 93-95).

While the Spaniards tried to use Mary “to achieve a religious and political integration that was more in harmony with the hegemony of Christianity and the dominant political power” (Gebara, 1989: 132); the message of “Our Lady of Guadalupe” was the origin of the message that was developed throughout Latin America, a local message and like “other colonized regions of the world, Christianity became a local production” (Chidester, 2000: 370).

However, on the other hand Guadalupe did not change women’s social standing in Latin American society. Despite Guadalupe’s religious significance for Latin Americans, it did not elevate women to men positions, otherwise the Virgin-mother figure, the literal reading of the Virgin Birth narrative, the Virgin Myth and the traditional interpretation of the Bible continued to oppress women throughout Latin American history. Significantly, however, Guadalupe instituted a particularly Latin style of veneration of the Virgin-Mother; she became an icon in which both men and women could read their own suffering and struggles, as well as be inspired by a hope of transcending them through her example as well as her divine providence. She became their protector. Slowly, locals eventually came to see Her benevolence and goodness as God’s attributes (Tavard, 1996: 248).

2.2. Theological background of Europeans colonizers and its negative influence on Latin American women inside and out side church.

European theological background

The patristic view of sex catalyzed a vicious circle for women to deal with in subsequent centuries. In patristic times women had only two options to pursue in society; either she would be a virgin and engage in monastic asceticism and be married to God; or she would get married and become a mother. Since marriage was perceived only for procreation and the world was already very well populated, marriage was viewed as pure sin (Ruether, 1974: 233).

As already mentioned, the medieval period was slightly different but not significantly better for women. Women would still have the same two options, one of endeavouring to forge a matrimonial existence; or to consecrate her life to religious service and virginity. Though many women dreamt of living a monastic life out of choice, in reality, it became more like an escape for them because of the oppressive circumstances of patriarchal family life. Through monastic life women would have the opportunity to develop talents that would never been developed if they had been in family life (Carmody, 1989: 172).

During the Reformation, Luther's theology was: "men had to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, but women's bondage to childbearing implied the further bondages of submission to male rule and restriction to the domestic sphere" (Carmody, 1989: 175). Protestant theology, contrary to what one would expect from a more comprehensive reformation, did not change women's social standing. New readings of the sacred texts were reduced to being instrumental for male clergy's claims to dominance over women. They did not attempt to change the traditional readings of the main dogmas; women were still portrayed as unequal to men as they had been in patristic and medieval sexist and distorted androcentric theology (Carmody, 1989: 176).

Throughout the seventh century the perspective on marriage in Europe and its theological influence in Latin America was controlled and elaborated upon by the Puritan “domestic economy”. This family fashion was consisted of the husband being the spiritual and material provider. He was to look after his dependents, which was considered to be God’s purpose for a man. Within this institution, women had to be docile helpmates in the spiritual and social sphere. In the Puritan interpretation of marriage, the wife was viewed as a pious subordinate partner designated by God to help her husband and the family, in their physical life, as well as in their journey to salvation. It was expected from the husband to lead his family as their head and the wife to happily subordinately help him and their children to achieve God’s will for their own lives (Ruether, 1987: 22). The puritan view of family worked from the philosophical vision of a harmonic societal hierarchy, just like the ecclesiastical, where women were barred from participating in the leadership of the Church. Resistance to this rigid structure was considered to be heresy and the devil’s work (1987: 23). Clearly, The Virgin-Mother has been a pivotal figure in sustaining this sexist idea.

However, Mary, the eternal virgin, became an important symbol with which people, especially women could identify with, “she above all was the mother who had watched her son die on the cross and had received his dead body into her arms...In her women could see religious emotion at its most feminine and profound” (Carmody, 1989: 173). The mother figure contrasted with the Lord Figure imposed by the colonizers in the Latin American context. The strict God that reject all the natives’ gods and which asserted only one true pathway to heaven stood in stark contrast to the docile and humble Mary. Mary slowly emerged to become the “maternal face of God” for the Latin Americans and it has grown deeper throughout the centuries (Boff, 1987: 250).

Latin American theological background

The historical picture since the birth of Latin America did not ameliorate the social position of women in society; it seemed to merely have deepened their oppression. By the sixteenth century, during the period when the Roman Catholic Church was struggling

with the Reformation, widely prevalent Puritanism seemed to have influenced Catholicism as much as it did with Protestantism.

Ana Maria Bidegain de Urán's "Sexualidade, Vida Religiosa e Situação da Mulher na América Lática" (1984) (Sexuality, Religious Life and Women Position in Latin America)⁸ shows that at the arrival of the Catholic missionaries and through the development of the evangelism in South America capitalism was emerging in Europe. She articulates that the capitalist system found a good base in Puritan sexual theology as it enforced an ideology of labour (54).

The Puritan view of sex and the capitalist ideology had one point in common; both of them reduced the human body to a highly pliable tool for social production. According to the Puritan point of view, sex was only for reproduction and the harmonic hierarchical family structure was meant to support it. The capitalist system was interested to exploit the human to its maximum in order to get to ever higher levels of economic development. It was a point that both the Catholic Church and the capitalist system agreed on. It steered the inferior position of women within society. Since sex was for reproduction and women were to focus on the affairs of the home, it contributed to the quickening pervasiveness of capitalist exploitation as it was now firmly in tune with the elements of social production (Bidegain de Urán, 1989: 54).

The given theological and historical background was the mind set brought to Latin America by colonizers and missionaries. In the sixteenth century Catholic sexual morality stepped out from the periphery onto the centre stage and sin was more closely related to sexuality (Bidegain de Urán, 1989: 54). This context gave support to the development of the Latin *machismo* ideology. *Machismo* was not very different from the European Patriarchy, rather an accentuation of it (Bidegain de Urán, 1989: 55).

⁸ My own translation of the article's title.

European Puritanism was centred on a male theological, typological and soteriological reading of the Virgin Birth. In South America Catholics and Protestants shared the beliefs of European Puritans, whom considered patriarchal gender behaviour socially acceptable. There are interesting differences between the two branches of faith however. Firstly, traditionally, they've had a tense relationship. Secondly they diverge on the intensity of veneration of Mary. Catholics are officially devoted to the Virgin Mother. However Protestants also acknowledge Mary's theological importance, as a virgin that was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, but do not worship her. Sometimes she has even been rejected, for example, like in Latin America "Protestants, in an effort to differentiate themselves from the Catholic Church, rejected and dismissed even the biblical Mary" (Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 86). In their services Mary is mentioned only at the most important times in the Christian religious calendar such as on Christmas and Easter (Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 87). Though, when it comes to gender relations, Protestants and Catholics fall under the Latin *machista* ideology. Both of them view women through a patriarchal frame of reference, rooted in the medieval-patristic Augustinian reading of myth. Latin American Protestants' interpretation of gender roles is as patriarchal as that of Catholics since it is located "in a culture in which the Roman Catholic tradition is a key element... They live surrounded by Catholic [] symbols that affect their lives... Protestants who live their faith in a Catholic social environment" (Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 88-89).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, through the struggle for independence "against colonial domination... Domination by Spain and Portugal was replaced by other great powers, such as England, France, Germany, and the United States" (Aquino, 1994: 15). However:

This change did not bring about the disappearance of unequal relations between men and women or the disappearance of patriarchal power over women. On the contrary, new forms of oppression gave rise to new demands and new forms of struggle associated with the industrialization process. (Aquino, 1994: 16)

Women “enter[ed] waged productive work” (Aquino, 1994: 16), later they gained civil rights “such as the vote, education relatively acceptable hours of work, and others. But the attainment of these rights has not done away with women’s oppression or their unequal relationship to men” (Aquino, 1994: 17), where they were forced to give their full attention to the family; while men would only give partial attention to the same matters. The role of the father in parenting was not equal, because his social responsibility was regarded as lying in the more important areas of seeing to the political, economic, educational needs of the family, etc. Men and women had distinctive roles in society and labour categories. As a result women were perceived as more religious, more family orientated, with no political capabilities or professional orientation. This reality provoked gender stereotypes “in the popular sectors in Latin America” (Aquino, 1994: 17); it gave support to what should be feminine and masculine. Consequently, as in the European medieval and puritan context, women were given only two options of being a mother and wife, always dependent upon the man or a consecrated virgin (Bidegain de Urán, 1989: 55) “thus women’s subordinate position persists in both domains... [they] do not share in the decision-making in either sphere” (Aquino, 1994: 17).

Feminist scholars have pointed out that gender social inequality in South America was fuelled by the Virgin Birth reading and by the worship to the Virgin-Mother. The cult of Mary further legitimized patriarchal religion, defined the role of women and oppressed women throughout history. It gave support to the *machista* culture; Mary was the perfect stereotype of what a women should be to “patriarchal expectations of women as submissive, dependent and passive” (Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 94).

The Catholic Church’s teachings emanating from the Roman metropolis strongly dictated the religious context in the Latin America. The teachings of the Catholic Church were always concerned with social affairs. Though, only in 1891 through the encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* it became official (Be more clear about what became official) (Hamington, 1995: 41). The encyclical merely reinforced the notion of women’s role in society as exclusively related to being mothers and wives. At the Vatican and

consequently in South America women and children were regarded as being on the same level of capability compared to adult men (Bidegain de Urán, 1989: 55).

New liberatory roles for women were tentatively articulated by the first wave of modern feminism in the early part of the nineteenth century; however it did not make a big impact in the Vatican, with the Pope Pius XI's declaration that it was intolerable that mothers were out trying to find jobs outside of the home (Pope, 1985: 181). It is important to point out that Catholic social teachings were being written "in the same time Mary was reaching her theological zenith, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth centuries" (Hamington, 1995: 41; Blancy, Jourjon and The Dombes Group, 2002: 30). Thus, "her official elevation did not correspond to Catholic support of women's liberation" (Ibid).

In South America the negative influence of this orthodox religious ideology was amplified when Catholic Action, a Catholic student group lead by European countries, such as France, started mobilizing in the region. Catholic Action was a lay group movement, supported by Pope Pio XI. Its main objective was to re-Christianize society. They were to fight against the evils of modern liberal society, and later against socialism and communism as they were perceived to have been a product of materialism. Essentially, this was an ideological struggle premised on the preservation of strict Catholic dogma. The movement was operated completely in the strictest Catholic authority (Bidegain de Urán, 1989: 57-63). Women started to play a key role in the movement. Upper class young women started to be taught about how to maintain the traditional family order and about how their traditional role was under threat from modern views, about things like liberal costumes that were in fashion at the time. While men were taught about sociological, political and ideological issues, women were taught of Catholic sexual morality (Bidegain de Urán, 1989: 59-64).

2.3 Pope John Paul II's teachings concerning motherhood and virginity

Pope John Paul II's teachings played a very important role in negatively reaffirming the gender structure in South America. The inferior position of women was being reinforced by the Pontiff in the Catholic Church even after the rise of the Liberation Theological movement in South America in the 1970s (Pope, 1985: 196).. I would like to point out just some of the points of the Pope's teachings on women's position in society in this section, in order to highlight the affirmation made by many Feminist theologians that the Christian tradition has generally been oppressive to women; it is the most inadequate and harshest form of the reading of a myth – The Virgin Birth (Hamington, 1995: 46-47).

While in Europe by the middle of the twentieth century women's rights were a growing ongoing issue in discussion to human dignity, in South America, in general, it was not even a matter of discussion. The Pope John XXIII in 1963 declared that women's rights should be revisited since women were becoming more aware of it, thus the gender relation should “not remain static” (Hamington, 1995: 41-42).

However at the Second Vatican Council it became clear that the Catholic Church was becoming more aware of women's issues and their fight for equity. At the beginning of the 1970s the church “moves into an advocacy stage in which the promotion of women's rights is espoused” (Hamington, 1985:42), however, ironically this advocacy was diluted by a lack of female leadership in the Catholic hierarchy, and “such a possibility [was] not even considered” by the Pope (ibid). Later, John Paul II clarified his view of women's role in society and the church by reinforcing the old view of them being merely mothers that were to be subordinate to their husbands and men in general. “His perspective reflects an understanding of gender equality in human dignity and opportunity, tempered by the maintenance of distinct natures” (Hamington, 1995: 42). In 1981 Pope John Paul II's encyclical reinforced women's primary role as a mother. In 1988 Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic letter, specifically concerning women. The Pontiff reinforced the Marian vocation as the model for women and the “virgin-motherhood found in the figure of Mary is reinforced to the faithful”, once again (1995:43).

Virginity and motherhood co-exist in her: they do not mutually exclude each other or place limits on each other. Indeed, the person of the Mother of God helps everyone – especially women- to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other. (Pope John Paul II quoted in Hamington, 1995: 43)

The Pope in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* confirmed his strong statements on women's position in society (Blancy, Jourjon and The Dombes Group, 2002: 47). He is "very explicit in defining Mary as the modern role model for women." (Hamington, 1995: 45)

It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments in which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing, the greatest sorrow; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement. (John Paul II cited in Hamington, 1985: 43-44)

Throughout the encyclical the Pope praises women for their attributes, qualities and strength. Though, ironically "women share equally in humanity, [] they cannot serve the faith community in the church hierarchy" (1985:44).

The Catholic hierarchy is recognized by scholars as the "world's most enduring and visible institution to maintain overt gender exclusion in its power structure." (Hamington, 1985: 40) Its hierarchy is the most strong and organized in the history of the Church. It still exclusively male throughout the centuries, women do not hold office, and they are

either excluded from the key ritual of Eucharist (Irigaray, 1993: 21). In Latin America Marian tradition has a very strong sexual message and this message plays a very important role to uphold the Catholic teachings on matrimonial life and ecclesiastical hierarchical organization (Johnson, 2004: 62). A man to be recognized as a man of God must be celibate and not mix with the sexual pleasures of the flesh in order to achieve sanctification. Women can just not join the clergy for her inferior abilities and aptness to sin. The Virgin mother image of sinlessness and intercessory becomes an unobtainable religious model, however expected to be achieved by the faithful (Hamington, 1985: 55-56).

The patriarchal reading of the Virgin Birth narrative developed in an androcentric context generated the Marian sexual message that has been the core of Catholic sexual morality teachings on marriage life and ecclesiastical organization for centuries. In the context of Latin America “The Blessed Virgin Mary” is frequently the most invoked title for Mary, and it is directly “upon her sexuality” (Hamington, 1985: 53). The church often praises her for “her virginity, faithfulness and selflessness” (Hamington, 1985: 56). Her love and mediation on behalf of humanity is a common topic even in documents that are not Marian in nature.

The ideal of femininity in modern society is still to a certain extent shrouded in the sexual notions of virginity, sexual chastity and motherhood. In the Catholic tradition, Mary’s sexuality instigates the moral theology which “perpetuat[es] compulsory heterosexuality, the valorisation of virginity, and the denigration of female sexuality” (Hamington, 1985: 74). The myth of her perpetual virginity has been an enduring trait of Catholicism and of the secularized society that has emerged in the ideology of the colonizers constructed gender structure.

On the whole, we have seen an oppressive reading of a myth emerging from a complex relation with the social construction of gender relations and society with which it was closely intertwined. In other words, the reading’s advanced over the centuries were closely interlinked with their social climes; simply, the patriarchal context which lead to

an assertion of virginity and morality. To conclude this chapter I would briefly like to raise the point regarding the negativity of the Catholic sexual morality that is based on the reading of the Virgin Birth, which feminist theologians have articulated against in and outside South America. I will not theologize the topic but instead use it to support my argument.

According to the social philosopher, Michel Foucault “sexuality is a social phenomenon whose organization and meanings differ by culture and era” (Hamington, 1985: 74), in other words we could say that the Catholic sexuality is what it is because of its nature as located in patristic sexual values, values that emerged from the early church (Bidegain de Urán, 1984: 54). As was mentioned these values were strongly influenced by Neoplatonism, reflections of “biological misunderstandings, misogyny”, and consequently by fear of women (Hamington, 1985: 74).¹⁰ Catholic sexual morality became the core religious impulse sustaining Christendom from its beginning until the contemporary era.

Feminist scholars have been claiming that Catholic moral theology is the most oppressive root against homosexuality (Althaus-Reid, 2000:13). Mary was the chosen way for God’s intervention in human history. “She was the vessel for salvation, so of course her way of life, including her virgin-motherhood, was the model for all women.” (Hamington, 1985: 75) This clear statement has been the source of social control, sometimes referred by gay scholars as “compulsory heterosexuality” (ibid). Since women have only two options, virginity or marriage, and the first is regarded as the superior lifestyle. “Women’s life is therefore morally licit only if one becomes like a male (virginity) or submits to a man through marriage” (Hamington, 1985: 75). The message between the lines is that women should wish and be inspired to be like men in all spheres. However both options given to women are “spousal” (ibid), women will be married anyway; either to her husband or to the church/ Jesus. Heterosexuality is compulsory even for those that choose a virginal life, and in addition to it the tradition sustains the fact that the ultimate purpose for sexual organs is for reproduction. Hence, any different type of sexual activities is illicit due to

¹⁰ See Hamington, 1995: 74-87, for an elaboration of this point.

the violation of the natural order (Hamington, 1985: 76). However, this perspective does not only apply to homosexuality. According to Fiorenza, Mary's virginal motherhood has two "detrimental effects [for] women" (1985:76). The first effect is the "perpetuation of the body-soul dualism that serves to undermine the equality of sexes" (Hamington 1985: 76-77; Schüssler Fiorenza, :622-23).

The essentialism that generalizes a biological difference into a gendered ontological dualism has been a long-standing means of excluding women from theological, political, and intellectual endeavours (witness the dearth of recognized women theologians and philosophers prior to the modern era). (Schüssler Fiorenza: 623)

The second damaging effect is the "stratification of women within the Catholic tradition. The valorisation of religious virginity over motherhood divides Catholic women" (Schüssler Fiorenza: 623; Hamington, 1995: 78). For Fiorenza, the tradition of men being dominant in society meant that they were provoked into an obsession for control in all spheres of society especially the religious. Thus, Mary emerged as a useful tool for gaining power. "Many women have argued that authentic woman's liberation will only come when women can truly and freely make lifestyle choices" (Hamington, 1995: 78). They have also argued that despite various options available for women to exercise their autonomy over things like their sexuality and their ability to reproduce, they should have the right of choice of their partner as well, instead of being fuelled by Mary's iconic figure of perfect womanhood dictated by the opposite sex.

As we can see in the modern era, it is amongst the phenomenologists of religion and theologians where we can find a number of feminist scholars, which articulate social justice and gender equality. They are representatives from different fields undertaking alternative readings of the scriptures and Christian symbols. Theology seems to be one of the only open forums available where people can address a critique towards Catholic Theology and ecclesiology; therefore I will approach the Feminist Liberation theologians work in the follow chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

The Enlightenment ushered in a new era in Christian academia as scholars gained new insights into a range of areas. It shook the bases of what were accepted as the most sacred truths in traditional theology opening the door to other academic influences in the interpretation of the Scripture. As a result of this, the biggest monotheist religious traditions in the world had to review their dogmas and creeds. A contextual reading of the scriptures became prevalent in different cultural contexts worldwide.

As a response to the new era sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc. were use as tools to a contextual reading of the Bible

Hence throughout this chapter, I would like to discuss the contextual Marian theology developed by Feminist Liberation theologians in a Latin American context.

3.1 An overview of Liberation Theology

Recently, in Latin America a contextual theology has emerged which focuses on the feminine experience and perspective:

[It] is set within the broad context of Liberation Theology. In fact, without this reference point it would have been much more difficult for women to contribute to the church and theology in Latin America and the Caribbean. In order to understand the power and significance of women's contributions, we first need to consider certain key features characterizing theological reflection in Latin America today. Only then can we identify what is peculiar to the work done from the perspective of women, both in theology and in their efforts to create new ways of living together in the church and society. (Aquino, 1994: 9)

According to Clodóvis Boff Liberation, Liberation Theology is a modern and more relevant way of “doing theology”, due to it being contemporary by nature, and focuses on the scandal of poverty in third world countries. Consequently it is a commitment to the poor in order to bring about their liberation (Boff, C. and L. 1986: xi). In other words it is a “commitment to the life cause, and struggle of the millions of debased and marginalised human beings, a commitment to ending the historical-social iniquity” (1986: 3). Thus, Liberation Theology challenges contemporary Theologians to work out a review or reinterpretation of the Scriptures, of Jesus of Nazareth's message, in a way that takes the interests and life experience of the masses into account.

Christianity is confronted with the daily injustice of the poor and trampled. However today we are faced with the claim that Christianity does not speak to oppressed people's most basic human needs. Consequently, as a response to this stark reality, as so powerfully evident in the third world context of Latin America, Liberation Theology was born. Liberation Theologians therefore asserted as their main theological core that Christianity should be liberating and not oppressive, and these values should be carried into the spiritual as well as into the social sphere.

Liberation Theology belongs to contemporary history, it operates on the level of every day life, it seeks to denounce the causes of oppression in any context, and deals with issues that affect the whole of society, consequently overcoming Marxism's monopoly in the fight to guarantee at least the minimal requirements of human dignity (Hillar, 1993). Liberation Theology finds its base in practical faith, the “option for the poor”¹⁰, as it deals with real problems of life (Aquino, 1994: 12). Its basic themes extend into “all spheres of life: destruction of basic survival systems, destruction of the ecosystems of nature and the earth, and deterioration in social ways of copying and interhuman relationships” (Aquino, 1994: 12). These themes are based in contemporary struggles in order to rebuild the first impulses of Christianity. Liberation Theology concerns all human beings whatever their ideological bent or religious adherence; it seeks to denounce the causes that produce oppression in any social context (Boff, C and L, 1987:88).

¹⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez's famous phrase in the liberation theological movement.

Liberation Theologians believe the poor or the oppressed are the key to hermeneutical interpretation of the Bible. They assert that Jesus' life and message helps the poor to interpret their lives and their realities in ways that bring them dignity and which encourages them to come together in struggle for a more decent life and understanding of their worth (Gutierrez 2003: 44- 45). Thus, since the Second Vatican Council Liberation Theologians have been working stridently in formulating critiques against the fundamental or traditional methods of interpreting the Scripture, as well as translating Jesus' message in a way that is applicable and relevant for contemporary society (Segundo, 1998: 12).

Instead of the message asserted by the classic theological tradition, Liberation Theology gives the gospel back its credibility, because it embraces the themes of Jesus' message of justice, equity and love, thus seeking the “utopic promise of a loving comradely world, where it will be possible for God to ‘pitch a tent’ amongst ordinary men and women” (Boff, 1987: 87-89). Liberation Theologians are seeking the Kingdom or Reign of God in the present, moving beyond the notion that it is an ahistoric advent, and affirming history as being in construction. They are concerned with bringing more justice to all that have been oppressed, hence restoring the Gospel's credibility by bringing the Reign of God into the midst of humankind.

Therefore as these themes, as represented in the Synoptic Gospels, have been interpreted in different approaches, its recuperation and translation for contemporary society has become more relevant in its offer to a Christianity that instead of being alienating, is more essentially engaged with humanization (Segundo, 1995:318).

Liberation Theology speaks against the authoritative traditional interpretations of the Scriptures which alienates the social reality of the oppressed and poor majority globally. They claim strongly that this line of theological thought does not generate a faith that generates the kind of praxis implied in Jesus' message, thus it does not embrace actions capable of positively influencing society, or, consequently, shaping the future (Brown

1990: 62; Chidester 1992: 224; Machovec 1976: 15). Therefore, Liberation Theologians interpret and assert that Christianity should be about embracing practical, individual, social, structural and cultural mechanisms, promoting liberation and equity, in line with the core teachings of Jesus of Nazareth's message. According to the Liberation Theologians, the Reign of God appeals to human beings and not only righteous structures, to the capacity building structures of individuals, both psychological, cultural, political, material, physical, and spiritually speaking (Libânio 1987: 142-147). The objective is simply the plain humanization of human beings, thus, it is a reflection and focussed on what it would mean to human. In addition, the politician within this stream does not restrain himself to the action of the “professional politician” but also to each human being, in the search for humanization. It does not limit itself to governmental actions, but to all human activities that concern the “unjust state of society” (Segundo 1997: 168).

Liberation Theology has done magnificent work in pioneering their field, as today it's impact is clearly evident in any theological context. Fundamentally, they have unmasked the insidious power of colonialism and made people aware of its force within their religious lives. In moving forward, at present, theologians from different contexts are trying to dialogue between formal theology and their own cultures in order to obtain a pure and original approach to the sacred texts and God. However:

[D]uring the last few years this perspective has substantially widened to include other important dimensions, from which liberation theology was previously absent. The importance of public and private daily life is stressed; for example, the social division of work between the sexes, the existence of stereotypes affirming the superiority of men to women, the unequal relationship between men and women legitimated by a supposed *natural order* of social functions, the importance of sexuality and interpersonal relationships, in which the poor women, in particular, is the victim of profound sexual discrimination. (Aquino, 1994: 13)

Despite these new and exciting engagements, Liberation Theology has however not taken feminist issues seriously enough. Women's experience was never given any priority, since Liberation Theology's understanding of reality prioritized only global social issues such as poverty (Aquino, 1994: 13). The Liberation Theological "view polarized the political and the public spheres of human activity to the detriment of the private sphere, and thus life was not taken as a whole but split in two" (ibid). Therefore, in machista culture, which asserted masculine domination, oppressive gender relations were never given serious attention (Rubio, 2001: 462):

This meant that theology failed to offer any fruitful criticism of private daily life, which is the basis of people's actual experience of living. The incorporation of these previously neglected elements is closely linked to the emergence of a new active participant in history and theology: *women*. Their commitment, activities, and reflections contribute enormous wealth to liberation theology, enabling it to broaden its horizon, method, and content (Aquino, 1994: 13).

3.2 Feminist Critiques of Liberation Theology

The reading of the scriptures took different forms in different contexts, according to the situations in which it arose. "Different criticisms and reforms are suited to different times and places" (Young, 1990: 38). According to feminist theologians, the prophetic messianic tradition continues and the church, through a patriarchally free interpretation of the Bible, could be used as a tool to liberate society from oppression. The liberation theological *Locus* is present in the work of many Feminist theologians; their work is deeply embedded in liberation hermeneutics. They continue to strive for a tradition that works from the feminist perspective where equity is a priority and liberation from sexism and any form of oppression is preached. Some feminist theologians have pointed out that even among the work of some Liberation Theologians "the patriarchal biblical world [still] dominat[es] their horizon. Moreover, because of the androcentrism inherent in their cultural upbringing, they were not inclined to develop women's share in the biblical

warrants for freedom” (Carmody, 1989: 175-176). For example, Sarah Coakley (1992, 97:102) critiquing Leonardo Boff’s *Maternal Face of God*, called his Mariology “romantic feminism”.

Boff’s Mariology is approached from the perspective of liberation theological hermeneutics. Besides him being audacious in choosing Mariology to articulate his ideas about the feminine side of God, he has failed in a number of ways. Boff has contended that many modern scholars see Mariology simply from the perspective of it being a pagan myth, a “product of a Greek mind, filled with a mythology of virgin mother goddesses”, lacking any true salvific theological meaning (Boff, 1989: 221). However, Boff also states, using the work of Bultmann, that God has used myth as His means of revealing His truth to the world. The myth of the virgin birth was a “primar[y] elucidation” (242), an understandable way to communicate to the world His maternal face and his feminine side. In the end, to him, it represents a “unique mixture of history and myth” (Boff, 221). He also acknowledges that the Virgin Birth narrative has been used as an ideological instrument “to instill the spirit of submission in women” (250). He further contends that there is no longer a need for mythical language “for [] understanding [] the basis of our faith” (222). Though, “we need another language, one more adapted to our [contemporary] ways of understanding” (222). Thus, he chooses the feminine as revelation of God’s face through Mariology (241-242).

However, according to Elisabeth A. Johnson (2004), Boff became trapped in his argument. His soteriology “connects men to God in a more straightforward way than it does women” (56), when he drew on Jungian psychological tools to show how Jesus came to “reveal[] God’s plan for the masculine” and that Mary was actually used by God for women to relate more closely to Him (Boff, 1987: 223-243). Boff also moves into dangerous terrain when he asserts a new pneumatology, stating that, for example, Mary was used by God to be the temple of the Holy Spirit in her “entering into historical union” with the Holy Spirit (Johnson, 2004: 56). According to Johnson, Boff ultimately brings a fourth person into the Holy Trinity “Mary is cast as the salvific feminine complement to the masculine Jesus” (56). Johnson states that Boff’s Mariology “situates

Mary, humble silent, and given in service to others, at the apex of the revelation of the very femininity of God to the world” (56)

Despite of the fact that Boff’s work can be contradicting and has stirred polemical debate; his work remains valuable because of his pioneering attempts at a new interpretation of Christian myth. In machista culture, where the feudal oppressive system dominated, Mary came into Latin history, merging in their culture and religious beliefs, becoming a genuine indigenous symbol, a Christian symbol which people could relate to and which they were allowed to worship. Thus, as a Latin person, Boff has tried to bring out this kind of relevance in his discussion of Mary, emphasizing for example, that as “each new generation finds itself in Mary” they may project their dreams and “sociocultural ideals, upon her” (Boff, 1987:251). As a Liberation Theologian he opened new tributaries into the river that ruled traditional exegesis of the Bible, by drawing on different traditions to analyze the scriptures and comparing Biblical narratives to so called pagan sources.¹² Boff’s engagement and hermeneutical method, has the overtones of Jewish Midrash. He “teased, reinterpreted, and even reused [] God’s [past] revelation in the present. More importantly, yesterday’s understanding of Scripture was thought to illuminate today’s experience and, therefore, today’s truth” (Spong, 1992: 137).

Nonetheless, it is important take note of how at different stages in history people made an effort to make their particular creed’s relevant. These reinterpretations, symbols, images, rites, mysticism, and rationalism were all drawn on as religious resources for cultural validation. Boff uses philosophy, human sciences and psychology to justify and continue Latin America’s unique religious praxis.

Despite Boff’s new interpretive style (or perhaps we could say his Christian Midrash), I do agree that he has failed to provide sufficient equity in gender relations. He has failed as a theologian and social scientist in theoretically bringing women onto an equal footing with men, and perhaps, tacitly, without intending to reinforced women’s inferiority

¹² Boff has been warned by the Vatican to be more careful with his theological arguments, having already suffered one public remonstrance from Cardinal Ratzinger (Coakley, 1992: 107).

through drawing on “dualistic anthropology” in his theories using what may be called “patriarchal feminine eyes” (Johnson, 2004: 56). Throughout his book he takes a strong line against exploitation and injustice, though he fails to emphasize Mary’s role as the figure that opened the door for the liberation of women. However, some feminist scholars have acknowledge Boff’s work as “extremely clever in the context and constraints in which he is operating politically”, that being the Roman Catholic Church, they have also articulated the idea that perhaps “using Mary as a [symbol for] the poor is [not] a *bona fide* feminist ploy (Coakley, 1992: 106).

However feminist scholars have developed their own theoretical frameworks with Mary as its focus that don’t always work within the theological confines of Latin American interpretations Sarah Coakley, stands out as a good example of feminist theologians whom diverge from the Mariological understanding prevalent amongst Latin America feminist theologians.¹³

Coakley contends that Latin American Mariology as expounded by Ruether’s, Gebara and Bingemer, are not “developed liberal feminist Mariologies” since they are not aligned with the major types of secular feminist theory (1994: 99). For example, Coakley highlights Mary Daly as being “delightfully backhanded” when she recognizes Mary’s audacity in accepting a pregnancy which was not defined by a relationship with a man. For example she sees Daly’s work as being more “critically perceived than Ruether” (1994: 99). Daly points to the “patriarchal undertones of the Annunciation story” as exemplified in her summary of Mary’s acceptance of the pregnancy: “Let it be done unto me according to *Thy* word” and not “I shall do what *I* want to” (1994: 99). Warner, having deconstructed traditional Mariology, predicted that Mariology will reach a stage where it “will be emptied of moral significance” (101). Coakley has also found in some French feminists theory work that may be being beneficial to critiquing Latin Mariology. Alison Jaggar in particular, a socialist feminist scholar, calls the work of the Latin Theologians “romantic feminism” (105):

¹³ They did not write specifically against Latin Mariology, but their line of thought does not align.

Jaggar calls “traditional” Marxist Feminism, which sees woman’s oppression as precisely residing in her exclusion from *public* production. This Jaggar sees as simplistic and “gender-blind” diagnosis; for there are specific forms of female oppression which even the right ordering of the workplace would not alleviate. A woman’s “alienation” arises not just the class structures of capitalism, which also alienate men, but from imposed cultural alienations which are gender-specific: alienation from her own body, for instance, through false expectations about sexuality and motherhood. (105)

Coakley’s arguments fail however when held up against the work of Feminist Liberation Theologians. For example Gebara’s *Out of Depth* has a firm anthropological foundation, she articulates how women’s bodies are perceived as objects in machista society including women’s selves, through psychological and sociological tools she claims the need for women to find equity not only in the social sphere but in her inner person (Gebara, 1999: 78-79). From a phenomenological perspective, Gebara focuses the blame for women’s oppression on “enculturated biology” and colonization “as a historical process that has subjected women to domination and marginalization” (Gebara, 1999: 79). Enculturated biology lead to social (the religious and familial spheres included) “and political differentiation, as well as forms of domination and support for a male-defined social and sexual hierarchy” (Gebara, 1999: 79). This represents a good syncretism of sophisticated elements of feminism with theology and philosophy. In this regard, María Pilar Aquino (1994) and Elsa Tamez (1989) could also be considered good examples. In some ways Coakley’s analysis is myopic since her critique is focused on a small body of work; as a result her claims seem to be generalizations of Latin American Liberation Theology. Coakley claims that Mary may not specifically have do with poor women, however, this is a myopic conclusion especially if applied to the Latin American context as we have seen, since, here Mariology has been identified as a “highly effective liberationist” tool against injustice to women.

Feminist Liberation Theologians have been identified by feminist theorists as modern and contemporary theorists whom have re-examined traditional Christian religious material “with an eye attuned to women’s presence and absence, women’s words and women’s silence, [with the] recognition given and denied women” (King, 1995:14). They have developed a “critical hermeneutics of liberation”, by engaging in a reconstruction of the tradition “on the basis of new information and the use of historical imagination; and employing new paradigms for thinking, seeing, understanding and valuing” (O’Connor quoted in King, 1995:15):

Through this process [they] can uncover in Christian scripture and history woman as agent as well as object, woman as participant and leader as well as the one overlooked and rendered anonymous, woman as liberated by certain features of the Christian message as well as woman restricted by patriarchy. (King, 1995:15)

3.3. Mariology in Feminist Liberation Theology Mariology

Feminist Liberation Theologians have thus pioneered their way forward in making Christianity relevant for the contemporary era. Drawing on their particular cultures, contexts and unique perspectives, they have contextualized theology focusing on the position of women. Their point is that in being stagnant “theology has been [] oppressive, irrelevant and false. For theology to be life-giving, it needs to be grounded in a specific context where a community can recognize it, relate to it, welcome it, and be challenged by it” (Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 85). In other words Feminist Liberation Theologians, like rabbis before the current era, “probe, tease, and dissect the sacred story”, they look for contemporary meanings, “filling in blanks, and seeking clues to yet-to-be-revealed truth” (Spong 1992:18). “It was the assumption of the rabbis developing the Midrash that the sacred text was timeless, that was true in the past, true in the present, and true in the future” (Ibid).

Thus they regard traditional theology as a product of religion marred by oppression and sexism which cannot tolerate the Christian reality implied in teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

These Feminist Liberation Theologians have been challenging traditional Christianity by probing and hard hitting questions, and have striving to change the face of Christianity in the contexts of poverty and violence. They have tried to recover and embrace the Historical Jesus, applying the meaning of his humanity to women, as well as marshalling the biblical Mary through the historical Mary. Feminist Liberation Theologians have questioned why women are not allowed into the sacerdotal field, a challenge which has reverberated to the most remote regions in the world (Ruether, 1996: 208-217; Tereza Cavalcanti, 1989: 118- 139; Maria José F. Rosano Nunes, 1984: 124-137). They have been arguing against women's position in society and as well as their subordinate roles as women within the family. Consequently, it has resulted in a new theology, a theology developed from the perspective of women, a theology committed to freedom of gender, race, and class, with the vision of a more humane world that is more open to relationship, that echo women's perspectives on life.

As discussed in the last chapter, early Christians were faced with a new terrain of struggle and were forced to defend their faith. Thus, they used pagan narratives, ones written in the Midrashic tradition, as literal sources. These scriptures were read from a male point of view in a patriarchal society. Thus, Mary's virtues and attributes were described from the perspective of the masculine appreciation of a woman. Similarly today, in a Latin American Feminist Theological discourse, Mary is seen as an autonomous young woman that autonomously chose to accept God's will for her life, even though she placed herself in jeopardy with the patriarchs of her time. According to Johnson:

Here is a woman whose worth is not dependent on a man; a woman whose yes to God's invitation was at the same time an assent to the totality of herself; a woman who acted with integrity from her own center... Poor women have used this approach subversively to emphasize Mary's

strength, autonomy, and prophetic spirit, which empowers their own earthly struggle against forces of death. (2004:32)

In 1987 Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer developed a genuine Marian theology. In building their argument they drew on anthropology in a manner that went beyond men's experience "as normative for all human behaviour" (12). This anthropology was not exclusively female but was "open enough to encompass the difference, multiplicity, non-homogeneity, and creativity of the human – man and women" (12). The main aim of these theologians was empowering women through their own culture and faith. Thus through the *comunidades de base* (base communities) women started to inquire about theology, God and faith. Therefore "culture shapes our being and our being produces culture" (15). They understood that the eternal was expressed in the "provisional, the diverse, the manifold, which appears in different shades in the most varied cultural contexts and period[s] in history" (15), they started to acquire knowledge and share their experience, and as a result, they became producers of this type of knowledge (14).

Hence our exploration in Marian theology does not highlight the qualities of Mary/woman, qualities idealized and projected from different needs and cultures, but rather aims at a re-read-ing of Mary from the needs of our age, and especially from the insights provided by the awakening of women's historical consciousness. (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987: 16)

The symbol of Mary "has gradually come to a deeper insight" and her mystery has a better position once it is looked from women's spirituality perspective (Halkes, 1983: 66).

Gebara and Bingemer have approached Mary's virginity critically. They contend that virgin dogma has developed along a sexist and oppressive course in the church tradition. Therefore seek to uncover the roots of this androcentric hermeneutics (1987: 100). In the hands of these scholars, the myth has been disclosed as being a sponsor of gender equity and liberation for all oppressed people. Their theological approach to the Virgin Birth

narrative is methodologically a reinterpretation of the scripture, mixed with a phenomenological approach of popular devotion (Johnson, 1991: 140). What emerges from their work is that “Mary as a person and symbol of critical hope: a woman of the people representing the messianic community of the poor, especially poor women” (Johnson, 1991: 140). They strongly argue that this narrative should not be used by society and religion for ascetic reasons, and point out that her virginity, like her motherhood “points toward service to the poor” among the people (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987: 108). These scholars read the narrative as empowering, since they contend that Mary’s virginity made it possible for the Spirit of God to dwell in her, allowing her to be a co-creator of the Reign of God. They reject any negative interpretation of the scripture and state that the narrative has nothing to do with women’s sterility or with the denial of their sexuality (107):

Mary’s virginity is therefore not simply a genital or sexual matter or an amazing exceptional case of parthenogenesis; nor does it entail disdain for sexuality and marriage. It is emphatically a message of deepest significance, utterly in agreement with the good news of the Gospel and with the way God tends to act with God’s people...Mary’s virginity is about the glory of the almighty God made manifest in what is poor, impotent, and disdained in the eyes of the world. (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987: 107)

Marian theology has developed gradually, with many feminist theologians joining in the chorus of this theological discourse and hermeneutical approach. Through Latin Mariology women have been liberated from their attachment to traditional images of Mary, such as “virginity, piety, helpfulness, forgiveness, goodness and devoted and selfless motherhood” (Sandra Messinger Cypres quoted in Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 90), which had previously limited them to an inferior position in society. Latin women have gained dignity and claimed their rights through their empowering theology (Aquino,

1994: 158-159).¹³ However, it is important to point out that Latin Feminist Theologians are not naïve or in denial about the past “injustices and violence done to women in the name of God and Christ” (1994: 158). What they are doing is using their feminist spirituality and “radical opposition to evil and sin; it rejects machismo and sexism” (58) to bring to society what they believe to be the justice and compassion of God – for man and woman (Aquino, 1994: 158)

Women’s spirituality in Latin America is a genuine expression of faith; their theological work is contemporary and a genuine contextualization of their reality. When one looks to Latin American history one sees centuries of humiliating colonial experience. Therefore, women’s theological work is a voice, a freedom that only recently has been articulated and put in words. As del Prado states,

Mary becomes for us a companion on the road in following her Son. So it is that we taught the piety of Mary which is so deeply rooted in our continent. We can reclaim her name for our spirituality; in the best sense of the word, our spirituality is Marian. (del Prado quoted in Aquino, 1994: 159)

Among Latin American women this new approach to Mary and her femininity has inspired an ecumenical spirit “Mary is the paradigm of faith, prayer, and solidarity with all the oppressed and all women on earth” (Aquino, 1994: 159). By taking in account their own experiences Latin America women identify themselves with Mary because they share the same language and the same hope. In this context Mary is seen as a woman of the people, a believer as any other woman and a mother (1994: 159). Johnson states that Feminist Liberation Theologians “pioneer the insight that Maria was like them, a poor women of the people...A villager who lived her trust in God in the midst of hard daily labour, she knows their struggle and their pain” (2004: 13).

¹³ Barbara Corrado Pope’s *Immaculate and Powerful: The Marian Revival in the Nineteenth Century* (1985) had done a interesting study of local Marian devotion in rural France. Through a analyses of local visionary appearances of the virgin, she articulated that a new sense of empowerment and autonomy was phenomenologically a reality among young women that could identify they selves with the Virgin’s humanity (176).

The main critics of Feminist Liberation Theology have come from theologians that work in completely different contexts. For example the Norwegian feminist theologian Kari Børresen has addressed a harsh critique of Latin Mariology, by looking at her own Catholic background, pointing out that it is “atypical, since it is Scandinavian, [Catholicism] is a minority religion, and gives very little, if any, attention to Mary”. She continues by saying that “in no way then do I represent the traditional attitude found in ‘Catholic’ countries. Faced with Mary as she is venerated in southern Italy or Poland, I am alienated” (Kari Børresen, 1983: 55). One can probably agree with that for these theologians it is difficult to perceive the depth of a “fruitful source of [a] theological discourse that speaks of the divine in female terms, images and symbols” (Johnson, 2004: 85), such as the Latin American.

To conclude this chapter I would like to revisit contextual Marian theology using the example of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Our Lady of Guadalupe’s image is a cultural symbol that affects Latin America in general. It is understood almost universally across South America, though the symbol has greater religious purchase in Spanish speaking countries. She has been declared the Patroness of Latin America by the Pope. This is also a tacit recognition of the devotion of the people as an “ongoing growth and a development of the Christian understanding of God” (Elizondo, 1983: 59).

The Virgin of Guadalupe is a symbol of sorrow and passivity. The Virgin has been represented over the years “as an example of perfection, purity, and submission” who has embodied traditional Marian gender symbols that have generally subjugated women. She has defined the feminine in an oppressive stereotypical manner similar to other expressions of the Virgin Mary extant in South America.

However, some have tried to redeem her as a liberating symbol. For example, the Protestant Feminist Theologian Nora O. Lozano-Díaz has claimed that she can be seen as a liberating symbol from the view of an “alternative feminist reading of the Bible” (Lozano-Díaz, 2002: 93). The author’s reading of Luke 1: 26-38 shows Mary as assertive,

as having agency over her own life through her ability to choose. Through Luke 1: 46-55, she makes her hermeneutical method clear showing Mary was “aware of social injustices and who celebrated the acts of God to reverse the social order in favour of the poor and oppressed” (94). Lozano contends that the tradition shows Mary’s main role as a mother, but Acts 1:12-14, shows her as an active woman, a faithful disciple of Jesus of Nazareth and engaged with the group of the disciples that started the early church (94).

Lozano-Díaz concluded her article challenging women to confront the oppressive character of the Virgin Mary, therefore also of Guadalupe, as previously having been imposed upon. She challenges women to use Mary’s “new biblical model of how to be a woman” in order “to achieve liberation and justice” (2002: 94). Lozano-Díaz is one more significant author in the field, having produced work that contributed generously to Marian theology in South America. However, it has to be noted that the author is Protestant. As has been the case in Europe, Protestants and Catholics have a long tradition of having a tense relationship in South America, with few occasions where they have been in theological agreement. It was ironically around the work of Gebara and Bingemer that Protestants and Catholics finally cohered, over the same theological point that separated them previously. Mary without any doubts has the ecumenical tools to unify faith and to bring people of different beliefs together in pursuit of the same ideals – equity and justice.

CONCLUSION

At different periods and to different degrees throughout Christian history one can witness what most feminist theologians have called a power struggle. A struggle centred around the conflict of women's equality with men "socially and even ontologically". Ultimately, this conflict is rooted in interpretations of Biblical scripture. Throughout this thesis we have seen how traditional Christian theology has been used as a theology of subordination, one dominated by "male headship of the order of the creation". This trend has filtered out from the church into, and fundamentally structured, western patriarchal society. This theological perspective, underwritten by a particular reading of the myth of the Virgin Birth, has cast women into being perceived as "morally, ontologically, and intellectually the inferior of the male" (Fiorenza, 1979: 142).

During the Hellenistic period, early Christians as they tried to defend their faith against Gnosticism wrote down their memories of Jesus of Nazareth using the unique literary tradition, Midrash. As the first chapter demonstrated, it is widely accepted amongst scholars that the Jewish religious tradition drew upon neighbouring cultures and religious traditions as they articulate their own traditional narratives. To them, therefore, it was acceptable to communicate their truths or beliefs based on surrounding cultural and religious resources. Therefore, the Greek religious and cultural legacy resonates powerfully in the ancient Jewish literary style, since Hellenistic resources were drawn upon at different periods and re-told and re-written in this style, with adaptations taking place at different times and in different contexts.

Later, when Christianity became more authoritative, it was influenced by Neo-platonic philosophy. The early fathers of the church read the Bible drawing on Neoplatonism, thereby reaching the theological conclusion emphasising the dichotomy of the body and the spirit. Ultimately, this andocentric and dualistic understanding of the scriptures lead to the belief that women were inferior to men, and that women were responsible for human sin after The Fall.

This notion was clearly expressed in the dualistic Christian expression of the image of women, in Mary/Eve. Mary as the virgin-mother that was submissive and obedient to God, was an example for women's model in personal achievement. Eve was her opposite: the disobedient woman that brought sin into the world through her lack of physical discipline in controlling her sexual impulses, thereby ultimately becoming the primary figure by which men identified women with (Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, 1979: 141).

This dualistic point of view positioned women as the official representative of sexuality, evil and carnality, defined by her body and "nature", with men being defined "by his mind and reason" (Fiorenza, 1979: 142). According to this interpretation, then, rampant sexuality was perceived as evil, with motherhood emerging as its only legitimate outlet for woman. In the ascetic "Christian tradition nature and body have to be subordinated to mind and spirit, so woman because of her nature has to be subordinated to man" (Fiorenza, 1979: 142). Thereby, "women[']s options in society became very clear [either] they [had] either to fulfil their nature and Christian calling in motherhood and procreation or they [had] to renounce their nature and sexuality [with] virginity" with this social discourse being sanctioned by the reading of the scriptures:

This attempt to see human nature and Christian discipleship expressed in two essentially different modes of being human led in tradition and theology to the denigration of women and to the glorification and mythologization of the feminine. (Fiorenza 1979: 142)

Carmody shares Fiorenza's opinions, stating that "patriarchal religious structures [have] shaped not only social relations but also people's selves" (Carmody, 1989: 181). The notion of gender difference has been inculcated in church by the reading of the scriptures from an androcentric stand point. Different cultures have had their families and societies organized by concepts emanating from the traditional reading of the Virgin Birth narrative (Tavard, 1996: 252). For example, Fiorenza argues how the sanctioning of birth control in the Catholic tradition is rooted in its patriarchal understanding of Mary's image:

The official stance of the Roman Catholic Church on birth control is, moreover, based on this dualism. Women are not allowed through effective means of control to integrate their reproductive capabilities into a life plan of discipleship and vocation, but they have to remain subject to “natural” biological reproductive process. Catholic women have either to fulfil their nature and Christian calling in motherhood and procreation, or they have to renounce their nature and sexuality in virginity. Consequently, this traditional theology has a place for women in the Christian community only as mother or virgin. Since “the genuine” Christian and human vocation consists in transcending one’s biological limitations, the ideal Christian woman’s vocation is represented by the actual biological virgin who lives in concrete ecclesial commitment. The Roman Catholic sisterhood is not open to all women but is based on sexual stratification and on patriarchal anthropology. (Fiorenza-Schüssler, 1979: 141-142)

In Latin America the social significance of the virgin-mother developed along a unique path. Colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese, Latin Americans received the Catholic heritage by force. During the period of conquest the Virgin was regarded by colonizers and missionaries as their protector. They were faithfully devoted to the mother of God. The Christians beliefs imposed upon the natives’ religious culture, however, slowly came to merge with their traditional beliefs. The maternal figure was an easier symbol to accept and understand locally since they venerated similar figures within their indigenous pantheon. This syncretism could not be prevented by the Catholic missionaries. This syncretism mimicked the kind of mixing and merging of religious idea’s and resources that took place at the advent of the Christian religious tradition. This syncretism eventually resulted in a local brand of Christianity epitomised in the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico.

Just as the history of the traditional reading of the Virgin Birth and the use of the image of the Virgin Mary brought about oppressive gender structures socially, these assertions became amplified also within the midst of machista culture. Women, religious or not, culturally have embodied the virgin's attributes and have had their sexuality shaped by an andocentric world. In Latin America, women have been forced to aspire almost exclusively to the ideal of motherhood. This belief was to become deeply rooted in the popular mindset, with people unaffiliated with any formal Christian faith venerating images of the Virgin. The power with which the Virgin Mary has captured the mindset of the South American public has sparked the attentions of many phenomenologists of religion. Scholars interpret the irony of the veneration of a traditionally oppressive symbol as being rooted in how the poor populous are able to relate to the Virgin's life, to her pain and sorrow. Furthermore, being maternal, she naturally holds out the opportunity for forgiveness and assistance in daily life.

In this context, the use of the Mary symbol was as oppressive in the Latin American context as in any part of the world. However in the 1970s with the emerging theological discipline of Liberation Theology, the possibility of translating her meaning into something more contextually relevant became more imminent. This became a reality as a critical derivative of this broad tradition, Feminist Liberation Theologians emphasized unequal gender relations, and started advocating for gender equity. Founded on Liberation Theological hermeneutics, the claim for justice based on class became more acute when gender was tabled as a factor just as critical to the liberation of the masses.

Feminist Liberation Theologians' main work is focussed on the construction of a liberationist Marian Theology. After the Second Vatican Council liberationist scholars have tried to shift their focus to a more ecclesiastical view of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, the Feminist Liberation Theologians developed a Mariology which was more in line with the poor women's reality and the issues that they encountered on a daily basis. They sought to empower women and use the scriptures in the interests of what they believed Christianity truly stood for, justice and equity in worship to God. They have contextualised their theological beliefs according to the necessity of the times and the

needs of the people. Leonardo Boff was the pioneer in this regard. Despite some scholars being critical of his work, his thoughts grew out of the Latin Catholic context of 1979, and were both quite liberal and progressive. He is a good and recent example of what one could call Christian *Midrash*.

The Feminist Liberation Theologians' theological approach is not much different, to Boff's work and even resembles some of the Judeo-traditional literary style. The difference today is that we have the tools to read the narratives according to our context, allowing our understanding to be guided by a broader anthropological approach that produces a reading of scriptures that makes people more receptive to the facts we cannot fully explain if we only draw on one academic tradition. In the same way that the ancients' traditions recorded their myths according to their understanding, today we are re-writing them, conducting a new Midrash. However, at present we have sharper analytical vocabularies with which to conduct scholarship. We can classify this process of reinterpretation as contextual theology.

For Feminist Liberation theologians' Mariology is a powerful tool to achieve gender equality. These scholars have been addressing important theological points throughout their re-reading of the Scriptures. Through their reading of the *Magnifica* and their response to the birth tradition, Latin Feminist theologians have been raising women's moral profile imputing them with the dignity they have so long been denied. They have given women freedom to express themselves and to see their femininity on the plain of God. However, I would still contend that it still remains a challenge for these theologians to keep tracking the myth of the Virgin Birth. By demystifying the narrative, they will be able to deal with virginity and sexuality on a human level, employing it against the sexual discrimination still present in the contemporary spheres of religion and the family. By focusing on the Miriam of Nazareth as she is also referred to, women and men will be able to relate to each other on a level which moves beyond the barrier of sexuality. Despite people recognising the Maternal or Feminine side of God in Mary, she should also be acknowledged as feminine simply because she is a woman, one chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus of Nazareth.

Through the work of Feminist Liberation Theologians we can see that Christianity can be transformed and utilized as a liberating tradition, one that fundamentally challenges the authorities exclusivist claims upon it, and proving in practice that the reconstruction of the Christian tradition can serve to overcome the oppression that has subordinated women for so long, subordination stemming from their being chained to a constraining catholic sexual morality rooted in a patriarchal reading of the Virgin Birth myth.

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